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Students with a GED in four-year institutions: the voices of persisters

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STUDENTS WITH A GED IN FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS:
THE VOICES OF PERSISTERS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Counseling

by

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DEDICATION

In loving memory of my father, Robert Shaw, Jr., and my mother, Emma Lee Barideaux Shaw, for their unconditional love and support, and for showing me how to overcome all obstacles to achieve my goals. They are always in my heart.

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I would like first to give honor to God, who through Jesus Christ's work on the cross and the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit, makes all things possible. This dissertation would not have been completed without the divine wisdom and grace of God. I thank Him because all things have worked together for my good. Additionally, without the assistance, guidance, and support of many people, this research would not have been possible. To these people, I wish to express my sincere and tremendous gratitude.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions. Qualitative research methods were employed to better understand the experiences of GED recipients relative to their progress towards baccalaureate degrees. The theoretical framework for this study was symbolic interactionism.

Data were collected in two phases. After a pilot study, Phase I data collection consisted of two focus group interviews with three participants each from two institutions in Louisiana. For Phase II, 10 GED recipients at each university were engaged in semi-structured, in-depth interviews, photography, photo elicitation interviews, and document analysis of students' records.

The data were analyzed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) Constant Comparative Method. The themes that evolved from the data were (1) quitting is not an option, (2) I just can't go back, (3) family influences, (4) faculty influences, (5) age, (6) math anxiety, (7) developmental education, (8) time on task, and (9) spirituality.

Comparatively, "I just can't go back" was only prevalent with most of the African American males. The need to support a family was stated by more female GED recipients than males. The older GED recipients were persisting in college for more idealistic reasons, such as their desire to change the world and make it a better place. Overall, most of the GED recipients were academically integrated into the university setting, with very limited social integration. Yet, the participants of this study provided rich evidence that GED recipients have many diverse experiences that affect their persistence in four-year institutions.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Did you know these facts? GED graduates include comedian Bill Cosby, Wendy's founder the late Dave Thomas, Delaware's Governor Ruth Ann Minner, and U.S. Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado. More than 95% of U.S. employers consider GED graduates the same as traditional high school graduates in regard to hiring, salary, and opportunity for advancement (American Council on Education, 2002, p.1).

Higher education is the gateway to prosperity. A high school diploma serves as a rite of passage to go through the gate (American Council on Education, 1992). If a person drops out of high school, as in 2000, 10.9% of individuals ages 16 to 24 years in America did (Kaufman Alt, & Chapman, 2001), is the gate closed forever? Researchers suggest that the General Educational Development (GED) test has served for over 50 years as a way for high school dropouts to have a second opportunity to proceed through the gateway to prosperity (Soltz, 1996; Thompson & Jimmerson, 1986). A person who drops out of high school, but passes the GED test earns a credential that is widely recognized by many higher education institutions, employers, and the United States Census as being the equivalent of a traditional high school diploma (American Council on Education, 2002).

GED recipients are an excellent source of potential students for many higher education institutions. It is important not to classify all students who leave high school as inadequate students. Research conducted by Baldwin (1991) showed that 2 out of 3 GED recipients (67%) completed the 10th, 11th, or 12th grade before leaving school. More than 1 out of 3 (37%) individuals completed the 11th or 12th grade. Some of the students who completed the 12th grade may not have earned a high school diploma for various reasons, such as failing the exit exam or not having enough credit hours to graduate.

Some of the individuals who leave high school and earn the GED credential do enroll in four-year institutions to pursue a baccalaureate degree. Horn, Peter, Rooney, and Malizio (2002) stated that approximately 7% of all 1999-2000 undergraduates enrolled in four-year institutions in the United States were GED recipients. Although this number is small and may appear insignificant, it contributes to the overall number of students enrolled in four-year institutions.

Choy (2002) found that among beginning postsecondary students seeking bachelor's and associate's degrees, nontraditional students were much more likely than traditional students to leave college without earning a degree. Among students seeking a bachelor's degree, 50% of highly nontraditional students were no longer enrolled after three years, compared to 12% of traditional students. Highly nontraditional students were defined as students who had four or more nontraditional characteristics (delayed enrollment, part-time enrollment status, full-time employment, financially independent, dependents, single parent, or GED recipient). Among students who began their postsecondary education in 1989-90, 31% of nontraditional students had earned a bachelor's degree after five years compared with 54% of traditional students.

Some of the GED recipients are poor students, just as with traditional high school students. However, it is unjust to deem all GED recipients as inadequate students. Since every student should be considered an important part of a higher education institution, the GED recipients who enroll and persist in four-year institutions warrant a study. Additionally, some researchers cited the need for more studies that examine the success of GED recipients in postsecondary institutions (Osei, 2001; White, 1996). This study focused on the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions from the perspectives of the students.

The first chapter of this dissertation is designed to provide a context for the study. The second chapter provides a review of the literature related to the topic. In the next chapter, the

methods that were used to capture and analyze the data are presented. An introduction to the participants of this study is presented in the fourth chapter. The themes that emerged from the data are presented in chapter five, followed by the discussion, conclusions, and recommendations in chapter six.

The next section provides background information of the GED test, followed by the implications of the GED test on postsecondary education, economic impact of the GED, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, definition of terms, and limitations of the study. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the significance of the study.

History of the GED Test

The General Educational Development Test was developed by the United States Armed Forces Institute in 1942. This test was implemented to ascertain the educational qualifications of veterans for military assignments and training, and later to certify the educational experiences of servicemen for further academic work or civilian employment. The 1942 series of the GED test assessed English, social studies, science, literature, and mathematical content knowledge. The majority of this test series focused on interpreting reading materials (American Council on Education, 1956).

Administrators of the GED test continued to stay abreast of reform in secondary education. The need to revise the GED test series arose as changes in secondary education were made. Accordingly, a second series of the test was introduced in 1978 (American Council on Education, 2002).

This series was characterized by a shift in emphasis from science and social studies reading materials to a separate reading test and a transition away from recall of facts toward application of conceptual knowledge and evaluation of presented information. Real-life contexts (such as work or home settings) and reading materials relevant to

adults (newspaper articles and time schedules) were introduced (American Council on Education, 2002, p. 2).

As the information age approached in the 1980s, the GED testing service conducted a five-year review of the GED test. The review was designed to ensure that the GED test evolved as secondary education and the world of adults evolved. The results of the review showed that the GED test needed to be revised again to reflect the shift from an industrial society to an information technology society (American Council on Education, 2002). In 1988, the following changes were implemented:

Addition of a direct writing sample (essay), an increased emphasis on critical thinking and problem-solving skills, an increased reflection of the diverse roles adults play in society, greater emphasis on understanding the sources of societal change, and an increase in contextual settings relevant to adults (American Council on Education, 2002, p. 2).

The American Council on Education (2002) also noted a change in the reasons for taking the test reported by the GED candidates. In 1942, 40% of the GED candidates reported that they took the test for employment opportunities and 37% reported that they took the test for further study. The percentage of those seeking employment opportunities slightly decreased over time and the GED candidates who intended to pursue further study increased over time. In 1978, 30% of the GED candidates reported that they took the test for employment opportunities. More than 65% of the GED candidates reported that they took the test to pursue postsecondary education (American Council on Education, 2002).

As information technology expanded and reforms to secondary education continued, the GED testing service once again revised the GED test (American Council on Education, 2002). In 2002, the third revision was made to the GED test and the following changes were implemented:

More business-related and adult-context information texts across all five tests; tests reflect the impact of welfare-to-work legislation and the increased emphasis on academic standards in the K-12 community; the language arts and writing test carry an increased emphasis on organization and have implemented a new scoring scale for the timed essay portion; the mathematics test has two booklets: Part I permits the use of a Casio fx-260 Solar calculator; Part II does not; on the social studies test, U.S. GED candidates can count on seeing at least one excerpt from the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, or a landmark Supreme Court decision; nonfiction now includes business-related documents for interpretation; and the science test asks candidates to select the best way to set up an experiment, interpret others' results, analyze experimental flaws, apply scientific conclusions to their personal lives, and use the work of renowned scientists to explain everyday global scientific issues (American Council on Education, 2002, p. 2).

An estimated 14.7 million adults worldwide have earned a GED credential since 1949. A record number of adults (860,684) took the GED test in 2000. The percentage of adults who took the GED test and who are planning further educational studies has increased from 34.8% in 1953 to 66.2% in 2000 (American Council on Education, 2000).

The GED test is more than just an indicator of knowledge. It provides an opportunity for individuals of different backgrounds to have a second chance at completing secondary education and possibly pursuing employment and further educational training. Vicky Logue-Fasquel, a GED recipient and firefighter, stated, "The GED can open many doors. It gave me the qualification that I needed for a job with the Federal Civil Service and enrollment at the university" (American Council on Education, 1992, p. 8). John Fusco, a GED recipient and filmmaker, stated, "A GED diploma provides a solid foundation upon which many have built successful lives" (American Council on Education, 1992, p. 5). Irene Allen, a GED recipient, former drug addict, and soon to be registered nurse, identified the "GED as the best way to reach her goals of building her self-esteem, furthering her education, and teaching her children the value of education" (American Council on Education, 1992, p. 6). Dr. Luke Barber, GED recipient and professor of philosophy and humanities, equated the GED with hope. Dr. Barber

stated, “Completing my GED not only provided me with a sense of accomplishment, but also with feelings of self-esteem and hope” (American Council on Education, 1992, p. 4). All of these individuals took the GED test, earned the GED credential, and pursued postsecondary education. The GED had a positive impact on the lives of these individuals. However, the economic impact of the GED is unclear.

Economic Impact of the GED

A significant amount of federal funding has been devoted to adult education programs. Federal funds for these programs totaled \$365 million during fiscal year 1999-2000. The majority of these funds were dedicated to GED preparation programs offered by high schools, community colleges, four-year institutions, community-based organizations, prisons, and other entities involved in adult education. Due to the large number of people involved in adult education programs and the amount of funding devoted to such programs, the economic benefits of the GED has been studied over the last 15 years (Tyler, 2003).

Educators, policy-makers, and others question whether or not alternative credentialing systems encourage students to leave high school. Agodini and Dynarski’s study (as cited in Tyler, 2003), Chaplin (1999), and Bingham (2002) suggest that the option to pursue the GED credential may entice some students, who may have otherwise graduated, to drop out. To this end, the alternative certification program could potentially have a negative impact on economic outcomes.

Tyler (2003) stated that many analysts predict that the number of students who opt to obtain the GED credential will increase in upcoming years due to the increased implementation of high school exit exams. Due to this increase, the GED will likely remain a significant credential. Tyler (2003) “suggests a continuing role for research that illuminates our

understanding of how the GED works in the U.S. labor market and how the credential affects the noneconomic aspects of the individuals' lives" (p. 394). This statement suggests a wide arena for future GED research including how GED recipients persist in four-year institutions.

Implications of the GED Test on Postsecondary Education

The GED Test was originally established in response to the need to help military personnel evaluate their competency levels, since many had not completed high school, and obtain the credentials necessary for further education and professional training. This test has evolved into a valid alternative for the public. Today, one out of every seven secondary graduates each year in the United States earns the GED certificate (American Council on Education, 2000). Many students who enroll in GED programs often indicate that they wish to obtain an equivalency certificate to pursue further educational opportunities (Behal, 1983; Hayes, 1991; Moore, 1982; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986). Research conducted by the American Council on Education (2000) shows that over time, the number of students pursuing the GED to enroll in postsecondary education has increased.

As a result of the increasing percentage of students who elect to obtain a GED and pursue postsecondary education, higher education institutions must be concerned with the persistence of these students. Furthermore, higher education institutions must also be concerned with how students who preferred a different approach to completing high school will integrate into the university academic setting. Unfortunately, the literature remains deficient in the area of the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions.

Statement of the Problem

Persistence in higher education has been thoroughly researched, particularly for traditional high school diploma recipients. My investigation of the existing research on the

persistence of GED holders revealed that many of the studies have focused on community colleges and have employed a quantitative methodology. Many of the quantitative studies examined the impact of academic preparedness, academic performance, and other variables relative to the persistence of students with a GED enrolled in community colleges (Beltzer, 1985; Fisher, 1999; Klein & Grise, 1988). Although these studies provide valuable information on the persistence of GED recipients, they only focused on GED recipients enrolled in community colleges. This study focused on the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions.

Research studies that highlight the persistence of GED recipients enrolled in four-year institutions from the perspectives of the students are scarce. A great need exists for in-depth studies that focus on the persistence of GED recipients enrolled in four-year institutions from the perspectives of the students. In an effort to augment the existing body of literature on the persistence of GED recipients, this study examined the perceptions and experiences of GED recipients relative to their persistence in four-year institutions. For this study, persisters are defined as GED recipients enrolled in a four-year institution as second semester freshmen and beyond, or who have been enrolled at a four-year institution for at least one year.

This study employed a qualitative methodology. According to Lincoln and Denzin (1994), qualitative research provides an avenue for underrepresented groups, such as the poor, minorities, women, and others to be heard. This study provided an opportunity for GED recipients to voice their experiences relative to their persistence in four-year institutions. The qualitative approach was used to elicit rich information from the participants.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions. Research indicates that factors such as social integration, academic integration,

developmental education, and time on task may contribute to the persistence of students in post-secondary institutions (Bagayoko & Kelley, 1994; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Beltzer, 1985; Kulik, Kulik, & Schwalb, 1983; Tinto, 1987). These same topics likely play an important role in the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions. It is important that researchers discover the experiences that contribute to the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions from the perspectives of the GED recipients. This study was designed to bring forth the perspectives of GED recipients about their persistence in four-year institutions.

Research Questions

The main research question that guided this study is:

What experiences affect the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions?

The research sub-questions are:

1. How does academic integration affect the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions?
2. How does social integration affect the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions?
3. How does time on task affect the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions?
4. How does developmental education affect the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions?

Definition of Terms

The following definitions clarify terms that are used in this study:

1. Academic Integration - incorporation of an individual into the academic systems of an institution (Tinto, 1987).

2. Developmental Education - a process to prepare students for success in college (Boylan and Bonham, 1992).
3. GED Recipients - Students who did not graduate from a traditional high school, but have successfully completed the GED test and have been awarded a high school equivalency diploma.
4. High School Graduates - Students who graduated from a traditional high school and earned a high school diploma.
5. Persisters - GED recipients enrolled at a four-year institution as second semester freshmen and beyond or who were enrolled at a four-year institution for at least one year.
6. Social Integration - incorporation of an individual into the social systems of an institution (Tinto, 1987).
7. Time on Task - the time that an individual devotes to a particular task (Bagayoko & Kelley, 1994).

Limitations of the Study

This study concentrated on the GED recipients' perceptions of their persistence in four-year institutions. This study was limited to GED recipients enrolled at two four-year institutions in Louisiana. The sample was small and non-representative of all GED recipients enrolled in four-year institutions. Additionally, the sample size may have been limited because only full-time students were included in this study. Nonetheless, the findings from this study provided valuable information that could be useful for higher education administrators and policy makers who are interested in increasing the baccalaureate degree completion rate of GED recipients.

Significance of the Study

This study served many important roles as it added to the limited body of literature available on the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions. As a result of the

GED certificate rapidly becoming a major credential in this country for the completion of secondary education, a need exists to examine the impact of college entry and completion for this group of students. According to the American Council on Education (2000), the number of GED credentials awarded in 1998 (500,000) more than doubled the number of GED diplomas awarded in 1971 (231,000). As the number of GED recipients increases, four-year institutions may have to better prepare for enrollment and retention of this student population. Higher education officials will have to ensure that GED recipients receive appropriate guidance and support that will facilitate their progress toward the baccalaureate degree.

This research study provided valuable information that will potentially have a positive impact on the educational experiences of GED recipients enrolled in four-year institutions. This study may also provide higher education officials with information to aid in the development and enhancement of policies and services that impact this segment of their student population. The American Council on Education (2002) offered the following insight about GED recipients:

GED candidates are a richly diverse group. Some have recently left school. Others have been out of school for several years. Most take the test to qualify for further education; others do it to encourage younger family members to stay in school or to qualify for a new job or promotion. Many who take the GED Test are preparing to enter a community college or four-year university. In fact, about one in twenty first-year college students is a GED graduate. GED graduates are successful doctors, public servants, office workers, mechanics, technicians, college professors, military leaders, business people, writers, and artists (p. 1).

GED recipients occupy important roles in our society. Therefore, a need exists for additional research to examine the persistence of this group of students and to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences in four-year institutions.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the persistence experiences of GED recipients in four-year institutions. To enhance my understanding of the topic, I examined literature related to the experiences of GED recipients in higher education. Existing research on GED student persistence is primarily quantitative and focuses on community colleges. I wanted to learn about the personal experiences of GED recipients in four-year institutions because these students are a distinct group of individuals with a story to tell. The deficiency in the literature and my quest for knowledge led to the development of this study.

In this chapter, I provide information on the process of the literature review. Thereafter, the review of the literature focuses on the following areas: (1) evolution of the GED, (2) early research on GED holders in higher education, (3) recent research on GED holders in higher education, (4) models of attrition, (5) research studies of attrition, (6) age and success of GED recipients (7) time on task, (8) the role of developmental education, and (9) math anxiety.

The literature themes identified in this chapter provided an overview of the research about GED recipients. While several of these themes informed this study, only through data collection, math anxiety evolved as another theme. Taylor and Bodgan (1984) stated that in qualitative research, expected and unexpected themes and patterns emerge. This aspect makes qualitative research unique. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) further stated that in qualitative research, the literature review is often written during and after data collection. These themes are reflected in the literature review.

Review of Literature Procedures

My literature review procedures were conducted using a four-step process recommended by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996). The process includes “searching preliminary sources, using secondary sources, reading primary sources, and synthesizing the literature” (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 117). A discussion of the procedures that I followed is detailed below.

Searched Preliminary Sources

My preliminary sources were the indexes to particular bodies of literature that pertained to my research topic. I examined *Education Digest*, *Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)*, *Sociology Abstracts*, *PsycINFO*, and *Dissertation Abstracts International*. The preliminary source that yielded the best results was the *ERIC* database. By accessing the subject index, I was able to find books, periodicals, and microfilm that were published on my topic. I used the *Louisiana State University (LSU) Libraries Online Catalog* to find books and journals the library possessed. The publications that LSU did not possess were ordered through the LSU Interlibrary Loan Office.

Used Secondary Sources

In my examination of preliminary sources, I found several secondary sources that helped me to refine my study. The references that were cited by these secondary sources provided me with a useful list of primary authors that had previously studied GED recipients. Those documents allowed me to gain a broader understanding of the need for additional research relative to persistence decisions of GED recipients.

Read Primary Sources

I obtained and studied most of the original research reports that were most relevant to my investigation. I also conducted a computer search of *Dissertation Abstracts International* and

ordered, through LSU Interlibrary Loan, dissertations on GED recipients that were completed by researchers at other universities (Fisher, 1999; Kothenbeuthel, 1993; Ricketts, 1996).

Synthesized the Literature

As I gathered, read, and critiqued the literature related to my study, I synthesized what I had learned from each document in preparation for writing my literature review. My discoveries and understanding of the literature are detailed in the remainder of this literature review section. I shall begin with a brief overview on the evolution of the research on GED recipients.

Evolution of the GED

The GED Testing Service was established in 1942 as a response to the need to help military personnel who had not completed their high school education obtain the skills and credentials necessary for further education and professional training. Consequentially, the program that was developed to assist World War II veterans evolved into a valid educational alternative for the public. More than 13 million adults worldwide have earned the GED credential since 1971 (American Council on Education, 2000).

Initial research focused specifically on veterans over the age of 25 years because GED testing began as a way to allow veterans to complete their high school education (American Council on Education, 2000). As time progressed and community colleges expanded, GED research mainly focused on GED recipients enrolled in community colleges (Beltzer, 1985; Fisher, 1999; Klein & Grise, 1988). However, as the four-year degree became more marketable, institutions opened their doors to recruit more students. Now, GED recipients are no longer limited to a public community college near their home. They have other options, one of which is a four-year institution (Sultan, 1989).

As these students enroll in four-year institutions, higher education administrators and policy-makers must be concerned with how students who chose a different approach to completing high school will integrate into the university academic setting. Unfortunately, the qualitative literature remains deficient in the area of the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions. Much of the early research focused on comparing GED recipients to traditional high school diploma holders.

Early Research of GED Recipients in Higher Education

Studies in the 1950s validated the use of the GED test for college admission of veterans. The American Council on Education (1956) conducted the first major study of the GED Testing program that focused on secondary education, higher education, industry and vocational education, and tests and testing techniques. In the higher education component of this study, the researchers found that a large number of students admitted to colleges on the basis of the GED Test fared well overall. The researchers also noticed a general lack of preparation in math and natural science. The study concluded that GED recipients should be required to complete special preparation courses before being allowed to enroll in regular college courses in these disciplines. Additionally, the researchers stated a need for further studies to determine if the weaknesses of students who fail to complete college are the same for GED recipients and traditional high school diploma holders.

Griffith's study (as cited in American Council of Education, 1956) at Ohio State University focused on the overall performance of 112 GED recipients admitted in September 1946. The results showed that 22% of the students withdrew without completing the first semester. The remaining students (n=87) remained to establish a record. The average GPA of the remaining students was 1.51. Andrew (1952) studied the GED test scores and college

transcripts of 248 GED recipients admitted to the University of Utah. The results showed that college first-quarter grade point average was the best single predictor of college success for this group of students. Roeber (1950) compared GED recipients and high school diploma holders who had completed at least one semester of college work at Kansas State Teachers College. The results of this study revealed that the GED recipients (n=71) earned lower grade point averages than the high school diploma holders (n=397). The GED recipients did not have grade point averages over 2.5, but over 50% of the traditional students maintained a C average.

Since the GED test was implemented in 1942, the majority of the literature around this time focused on the GED recipients' adequacy of preparation for higher education as measured by grade point average (GPA). The other theme during this time was comparison research between GED recipients and traditional high school diploma holders. These studies provided the foundation for future studies.

Recent Research of GED Recipients in Higher Education

Owens (1989) studied first semester college performance of 506 GED recipients. The results showed that of 253 (50%) of the GED graduates earned a grade point average at least 2.5 during their first semester of college and were classified as successful. Additionally, the age of the GED student was a significant factor in successful course completion, as defined by a grade of C or better. Students over the age of 25 years were more successful than younger students. Based on the number of GED recipients who did not re-enroll after the first semester (49%), the researcher concluded that GED recipients might experience some difficulties during the first semester of college.

McElroy (1990) completed a study using an equal number of randomly selected GED recipients (n=50) and traditional high school diploma recipients (n=50). The researcher used

descriptive statistics to analyze the college transcripts. The results showed that the GED recipients earned higher grade point averages than the traditional high school graduates. The 50 traditional high school graduates had a mean grade point average of 2.76 with a standard deviation of 1.03. The GED recipients had a mean grade point average of 2.93 with a standard deviation of .87.

Klein and Grise (1988) compared the success of GED and traditional high school graduates at Florida's community colleges. The GED recipients earned an average GPA of 2.54 and the high school diploma holders earned a GPA of 2.75. The results showed that 49% of traditional high school diploma holders graduated and 26% of the GED recipients graduated.

Much research on GED recipients has been based upon self-reported data (Behal, 1983; Cervero & Peterson, 1982; Hartwig & Beder, 1992). Behal (1983) conducted a follow-up study to a Spring 1980 national survey of GED examinees that focused on post-secondary activities (n=1,845). The results showed that 49% of the respondents enrolled in postsecondary education. The largest percentage of enrollment was in community or junior colleges (28%) and the smallest enrollments were in four-year colleges or universities (6%).

Hartwig and Beder (1992) conducted a follow up study of 1980, 1985, and 1988 GED graduates (n=7,500). The respondents stated that life was better in terms of employment, income, personal savings, and further education than it had been before receiving the GED diploma. Additionally, the research participants declared that they were able to better assist their children with schooling since earning the GED diploma.

Cervero and Peterson (1982) conducted a study to assess the impact of earning a GED on the recipients' employment and participation in educational activities. A random sample of 1,906 subjects was administered a survey; however, the response rate was very low (24%). The results

indicated that the GED credential was more helpful to this group in obtaining a new job (52%) than in improving their situation at their current job (20%). More than 75% planned to attend an educational program in the future and 45% of the respondents were students persisting in some type of educational program.

The majority of the literature presented in this section placed very little attention, if any, on the experiences of GED recipients in four-year institutions from their perspectives. My hope is that my research study makes a meaningful contribution to the qualitative literature about the persistence of this group of students. The next section will provide information on models of attrition.

Models of Attrition

Several models have been developed by researchers to study student persistence in higher education (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). Spady (1970) developed a model of the college dropout process by drawing on the analogy between the theory of suicide, developed by Emile Durkheim, and the dropping out process. The model emphasized the impact of social integration and academic potential on student persistence in college. In Spady's model, college was viewed as a social system with its own values and social structure. Dropouts from the social system were viewed in a manner similar to that of dropouts from the larger society.

Tinto (1975) expanded Spady's model to explain how and why students drop out of college. The Tinto model is longitudinal and describes persistence or dropout behavior primarily as a function of the quality of a student's interactions with the academic and social systems of an institution. Specifically, Tinto's model cited family background, individual characteristics, prior experiences, goal commitment, institutional commitment, grade performance, intellectual development, peer group interactions, faculty interactions, and the academic and social systems

of the institution as having an impact on student retention. Tinto viewed dropping out of college as a continuous process that involved aspects of the past and present life of students. Based on my review of the literature, Tinto's 1975 model has not been explicitly applied to GED recipients enrolled in four-year institutions.

Tinto (1987) revised his model of student departure (see Figure 1 for model). The revised model depicts the longitudinal process of departure as it occurs in higher education institutions. Additionally, the model shows how students come to voluntary withdraw from higher education institutions. Like the first model, this model has not been explicitly applied to GED recipients enrolled in four-year institutions.

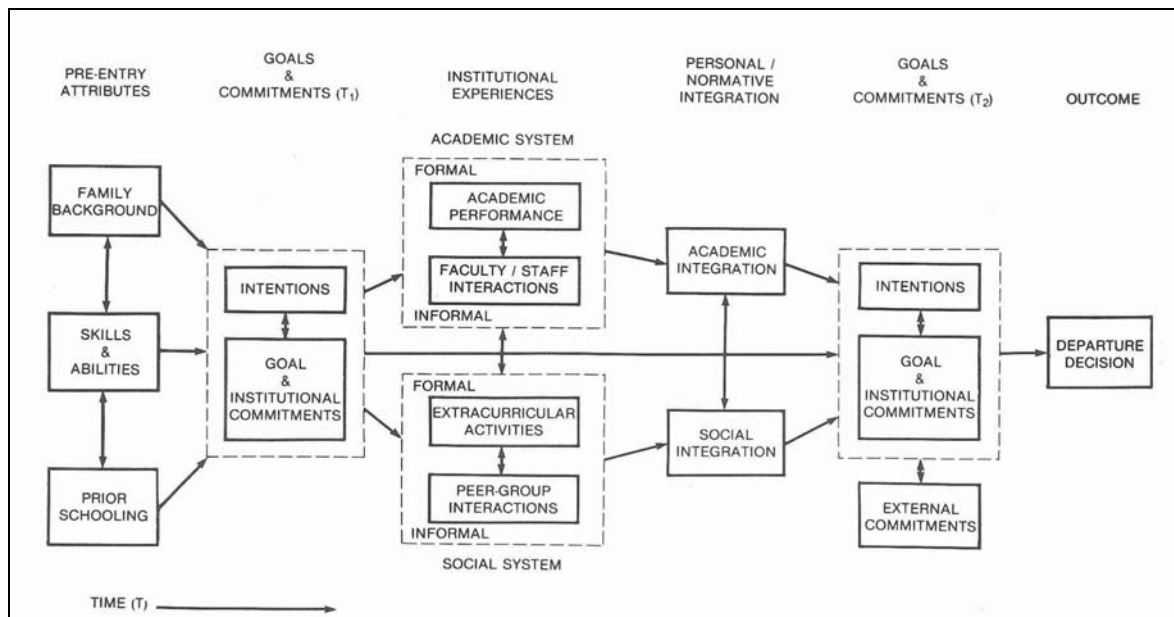


Figure 1. A model of institutional departure (Tinto, 1987).

A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition was developed by Bean and Metzner (1985). Metzner and Bean (1987) slightly expanded their earlier attrition model to include clarification of key variables associated with nontraditional student attrition.

Bean and Metzner (1985) define the nontraditional student by age, residence, and attendance.

According to Bean and Metzner (1985),

a nontraditional student is older than 24, or does not live in a campus residence (e.g., is a commuter), or is a part-time student, or some combination of these three factors; is not greatly influenced by the social environment of the institution; and is chiefly concerned with the institution's academic offerings (especially courses, certification, and degrees). (p. 489)

According to Bean and Metzner (1985), the model indicates that dropout decisions are based on four sets of variables. The first set is academic variables (study habits, academic advising, absenteeism, degree of certainty about academic major, and course availability). Students with poor academic performance are expected to drop out at higher rates than students who perform well. The second factor is intent to leave, which is expected to be influenced primarily by the psychological outcomes and academic variables (usefulness of education, satisfaction, goal commitment, stress, and GPA). Background and defining variables are the third group of variables (age, enrollment status, residence, educational goals, high school performance, ethnicity, and gender). The last group of variables is environmental variables that have a direct, substantial effect on dropout decisions (finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer).

Unfortunately, the definition of a nontraditional student by Bean and Metzner (1985) is not inclusive of GED recipients. The model only addresses high school graduates and their academic performance as the strongest pre-enrollment predictor of persistence for nontraditional students. According to the model, the main difference between the attrition process of traditional and nontraditional students is that nontraditional students are more affected by the external environment than by social integration variables affecting traditional student attrition.

Research Studies of Attrition

Beltzer (1985) conducted a study to test Tinto's conceptual model on a group of GED examinees enrolled at a community college. The sample consisted of 198 GED recipients and 201 traditional high school graduates who entered Queensborough Community College in Fall 1981. Students responded to a questionnaire to determine the levels of academic integration, social integration, institutional commitment, and goal commitment. The results of this investigation supported the predictive validity of the Tinto Model in identifying potential dropouts among GED examinees. For the GED examinees, 81% of the persisters and 74% of the dropouts were predicted successfully. First year GPA was the most important predictor of persistence. The study showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the GED examinees and the traditional high school graduates in the rate of persistence. Older GED examinees had a slightly higher persistence rate than students between the ages of 17 and 19 years.

Ashar and Skenes (1993) conducted a study to determine whether or not Tinto's Model could be applied to nontraditional students. The nontraditional student was defined by housing status (on or off campus), employment (full or part-time), and family status (married or not married and with or without children). The sample consisted of 25 adult learner classes at a university's management and business college who were working towards a bachelor's degree. The attrition rates of these classes were calculated using four variables (social, academic, and career integration, and class size). The results showed that socially integrated and smaller classes were better able to retain their students.

Bean (1985) found college grades, institutional fit, institutional commitment, and environmental factors were positively related to the dropout syndrome. Institutional fit and

institutional commitment had the greatest effect on the dropout syndrome. In a similar study, Pascarella (1985) found that institutional environment, organizational characteristics, and student pre-college traits directly impacted the interaction of peers and faculty. In addition, the background of the students and the demands of the institution and social environment directly influenced the quality of student effort.

Moore (1995) and Windham (1994) found that full-time attendance in college is the most prevalent characteristic of persisters. Full-time employment, low grade point averages, lack of time, family obligations, and financial concerns have been found to negatively impact student persistence (Bonham & Luckie, 1993). Many of the factors detrimental to postsecondary persistence are associated with students who did not follow a traditional path to postsecondary education (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Berkner, Cuccaro-Alamin, McCormick, and Bobbitt (1996) identified several risk factors that contributed to attrition. These risk factors include delaying entry into postsecondary education after high school, not receiving a traditional high school diploma, being financially independent of parents, having children, being a single parent, attending school part-time, and working full-time while enrolled in postsecondary education. The findings of this study showed that the overall likelihood of having attained a degree or of still being enrolled five years after beginning postsecondary education decreases as the number of risk factors increases. More than 78% of the first-time beginners with no risk factors when they began postsecondary education had attained a credential or were still enrolled. Students with three or more risk factors (43%) dropped out (Berkner et al., 1996).

Age and Success of GED Recipients

Age has been identified as having an impact on the success of GED recipients in several studies. Russo (1969) found that veterans had better achievements than non-veterans; those

above the median age (25 years and older) did better than those below the median age; and students who were married did better than those who were not married. Topp (1972) found that GED holders who were most successful in their first semester were married veterans over 28 years old. A study conducted by Colert (1984) showed that older GED recipients (25 years and older) performed better academically than their younger counterparts. Owens (1989) found similar results. A higher portion of older students (25 years and older) achieved success than the younger students.

The results of a study conducted by Price (1993) showed that older students dropped out of college during the first three weeks of the semester. One of the reasons cited for dropping out was that the non-traditional age student may have more difficulty with self confidence. Additionally, the older student may be hesitant to ask for help due to a fear of being judged as inadequate to pursue a college education.

Research conducted by Windham (1994) showed that students most likely to remain enrolled were younger students. The older students were least likely to return to college. Berkner et al. (1996) found a direct relationship existed between the age at entry into postsecondary institutions and the number of risk factors. Older nontraditional students (25 years and older) who began postsecondary education were less likely to have attained a degree or still be enrolled after five years than traditional 18-year-old beginners.

Osei (2001) found a difference in GPA between younger (23 years and younger) and older GED undergraduates. The older GED undergraduates earned higher grades than their younger counterparts. To this end, we are still unclear about the link between age and success of GED recipients.

Time on Task

Bagayoko and Kelley (1994) assert that while numerous studies address the issue of student retention in higher education (Bean 1982; Kember, 1989; Tinto, 1975), a major variable or factor is neglected in most retention models. This variable is time on task. According to Bagayoko and Kelley (1994), the time it takes an individual to perform a given task decreases as the number of times the individual practices the task increases. In other words, practice renders better performance. The shorter the time it takes to perform a task completely and correctly, the higher the level of proficiency. Hence, as the number of practices increases, so does the level of proficiency for the individual. Research conducted by Bagayoko and Kelley (1994) found that students who spend more time on academic and related tasks have greater persistence rates than those students who spend little time on task.

Based on my review of the literature, time on task has not been studied as it relates to the persistence of GED recipients. A part of the interview guide for this study focused on the time that GED recipients spend on task (studying). Young (2002) reported that the tip given most consistently by professors and college officials to students relative to college success is to simply do their homework. Research shows that the more time students devote to studying, the better their chances of success in college (Moore & Bagayoko, 1994; Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991).

Role of Developmental Education

The American Council on Education conducted the first major study of the GED Testing Program in 1956. The researchers noted an overall lack of preparation of GED recipients in natural sciences and mathematics. The study suggested that applicants to postsecondary institutions should be required to complete special preparation courses before being allowed to enroll in college level science or mathematics courses (American Council on Education, 1956).

Although the researchers did not explicitly state that GED recipients should be required to enroll in developmental or remedial courses, the recommendation to have GED recipients enroll in these courses was strongly encouraged.

Based on my understanding of this research study, I decided to review some of the literature on developmental education to shed light on the topic. Some scholars believe that developmental education is a process where adults identify their beliefs, clarify their goals, and formulate an action plan (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989; Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1968). Rubin (1991) defined developmental education as “a field of education concerned with improving the academic performance of students” (p. 5).

Lewis, Farris, and Greene (1996) examined freshmen enrollment in college-level remedial education courses. The results revealed that 29% of the freshmen enrolled in the fall of 1995 were required to take at least one remedial reading, writing, or mathematics course. More than 20 years earlier, Byrd, Hayes, Hendrix, Simpson, and Boone (1973) conducted a study to determine if a difference existed in the performance level of freshmen GED recipients and traditional high school diploma holders. The results showed that both GED recipients and regular high school graduates would benefit from skill reinforcement in math, reading, and English.

Kulik, Kulik, and Schwalb (1983) conducted a study to examine the impact of remediation on the grade point averages of the participants. The results showed participation in remedial education was associated with improved grade point average and increased persistence. Boylan and Bonham (1992) conducted a comprehensive study of 150 institutions on the impact of developmental education on cumulative grade point average, retention, and student performance in regular college courses. The results revealed that developmental programs had a

positive impact on the retention of students and their success in later courses. Additionally, the students who participated in a developmental program were as likely to persist and graduate as those students who did not participate in the program. Boylan and Bonham (1992) concluded that the main purpose of developmental programs is to prepare students for success in later college courses.

Hamilton's study (as cited in Tyler, 2003) revealed that 85% of GED holders (n=276) at a community college required remedial coursework. Rose (1999) concluded that high percentages of dropouts who earn the GED credential need at least some remediation before engaging in postsecondary academic coursework. Based on my review of the literature, not many studies exist that focus on the impact of developmental education on the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions. However, based on the data that were collected for this study, developmental educational courses, particularly in mathematics, were needed and have contributed to the persistence of these GED recipients.

Math Anxiety

Math anxiety is a theme that evolved during data collection and analysis. I decided to include this topic as a theme in this literature review because it was so prevalent and important for the GED recipients. Most of the participants in this study experience math anxiety and have mentioned math as an obstacle to persisting in a four-year institution.

Many aspects of daily life require some knowledge of mathematics. Knowledge of mathematics and the ability to use this knowledge is critical to the pursuit of many existing and newly emerging occupational fields. Moreover, all undergraduate students are required to take some level of mathematics. If students suffer from math anxiety, their willingness to enroll and succeed in math courses is diminished.

Richardson and Suinn (1972) defined math anxiety as “feelings of tension and anxiety that interfere with manipulation of numbers and solving of mathematics problems in a wide variety of ordinary life and academic experiences” (p. 551). Numerous studies have examined the nature of math anxiety (Roth, 2002; Viens & Kallenbach, 2001; Woodard, 2002). Bohuslov (1980) stated that math anxiety knows no boundaries of race, gender, age, or other characteristics. Other studies have explored the effects of math anxiety (Cemen, 1987; Quilter & Harper, 1988). Some of the effects of math anxiety included an inability to cope with math at a more than basic level (Quilter & Harper, 1988) and the avoidance of math and math-related careers (Cemen, 1987; Tobias & Weissbrod, 1980).

Some treatment programs to alleviate math anxiety have been implemented. Siegel, Galassi, and Ware (1985) recommended increasing mathematics performance through intervention programs that focus on increasing math skills. The authors believe that the end result would be reduced math anxiety. Additional treatment programs include self-help books that focus on reducing or coping with anxiety or stress. Green (1986) recommended a fundamental treatment to alleviating math anxiety. This treatment is to simply practice mathematical problems. The findings of a study conducted by Green (1986) supported the contention that the practice of mathematical problems was a significant variable in reducing the level of math anxiety. This finding coincides with the literature about time on task. The more time that a student devotes to a particular task, the better the student becomes at that task (Bagayoko & Kelley, 1994).

Conclusion

Studies that provided information on the experiences of GED recipients in postsecondary institutions were reviewed in this chapter. This chapter began with an explanation of the review

of the literature procedures followed by a review of the research. The research was grouped into the following categories: (1) evolution of the GED, (2) early research on GED holders in higher education, (3) recent research on GED holders in higher education, (4) models of attrition, (5) research studies of attrition, (6) age as a factor of success (7) time on task, (8) the role of developmental education, and (9) math anxiety.

As the number of GED graduates who enroll in four-year institutions increases, it becomes imperative for these institutions to learn more about the persistence experiences of GED recipients. Only through a better understanding of GED recipients and an appreciation of their experiences will four-year institutions be able to respond with appropriate and meaningful institutional services that promote the success of this increasing group of students.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study investigated the experiences of a selected group of GED recipients enrolled in four-year institutions. Through focus group interviews, photography, subsequent photo elicitation interviews, and semi-structured, in-depth interviews, students' words were elicited to learn about their persistence experiences while enrolled in four-year institutions. The overall goal of this study was to gain knowledge about the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions.

This study employed a qualitative methodology to develop a broader conception of the topic. The main purpose of this chapter is to describe the procedures that were employed for this study. This information includes the theoretical framework, research design, setting, sampling techniques, data collection processes, and data analysis. These procedures were employed to achieve the primary purpose of this study, which was to gain an awareness and appreciation of the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions.

Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) stated that research studies should be planned carefully and the authors should provide a thorough process for conducting research. This chapter contains the procedures that I employed to complete this research study. I followed the procedures recommended by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996). The procedures were to "(1) formulate a research problem of interest and value; (2) select participants to study using specialized sampling techniques; (3) collect data; and (4) analyze the data" (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 551-568). The next paragraph details how the research problem for this study was formulated followed by a discussion of the selection of participants.

The experiences of GED recipients who enroll in post-secondary institutions have intrigued me since I have been working in higher education. I served many GED recipients while working as an Outreach Generalist with the Educational Opportunity Center (EOC) at a four-year institution from July 12, 1997, through May 31, 1998. The EOC, a program funded by the United States Department of Education, is designed to provide educational and career counseling for students.

The GED recipients who received the services of the EOC were different. The appearance of these students did not fit the stereotypes, such as being a minority, poor, and not smart enough to complete high school (Rose, 1999). Many of these students were non-minority, from a middle to high socio-economic status, and had high grade point averages. I learned from the participants that their reasons for dropping out of high school varied from not being able to handle a structured schedule to the need to care for family members.

My frequent contact with these students left me with many unanswered questions about their experiences. I often wondered: Why did these students drop out of high school? Why did they decide to return to college? Why did they choose to attend a four-year institution? These questions, among others, sparked an interest to learn about their experiences. Based on my desire to find deeper meanings of the persistence experiences for GED recipients in four-year institutions, I decided to conduct a qualitative research study.

The population for this study was composed of GED recipients working towards baccalaureate degrees at Alpha University (AU) and Omega University (OU). Alpha and Omega Universities are the pseudonyms assigned to these institutions to ensure confidentiality. AU and OU were selected as data collection sites because both institutions had a considerable number of GED recipients and both institutions granted me access to conduct my research study.

The data collection process involved two phases. After a pilot study, Phase I data collection consisted of focus group interviews. The sample consisted of three GED recipients enrolled at AU and three GED recipients enrolled at OU during Spring 2003 as full time, freshmen (second semester) and beyond, or who had been enrolled for at least one year. Students who transferred from other institutions, including community colleges, were invited to participate in this study. The only stipulation was that these students had to be enrolled for at least one year at either AU or OU. The participants were selected using convenience and snowball or chain sampling. The information elicited from the respondents was used to inform my semi-structured, in-depth individual interview guide.

Phase II data collection consisted of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, photography, subsequent photo elicitation interviews, and document analysis of students' records (student transcripts and ACT or SAT scores). The sample was composed of 10 participants at AU and 10 participants at OU enrolled during Spring and Summer 2003 as full time, freshmen (second semester) and beyond, or who had been enrolled for at least one year. Students who transferred from other institutions, including community colleges, were also included. The only stipulation was that these students had to be enrolled for at least one year at either AU or OU. These participants were selected using convenience and snowball or chain sampling. The data from Phase I and Phase II data collection were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following section provides an overview of the theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical perspective for this study was based on my understandings of symbolic interactionism from literature by Blumer (1969), Bogdan and Biklen (1998), Schwandt (1994),

and Taylor and Bogdan (1984). Drawing on the work of George Mead, Blumer (1969) stated that symbolic interactionism rested in three basic premises.

The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (p. 2).

Symbolic interactionism is commonly used in qualitative research. This framework serves as an approach to discover and understand the meanings of events and how individuals define their realities as a result of those events. The social meanings that people attach to the world around them are of significance in symbolic interaction (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

After reviewing the works of Blumer (1969), Bogdan and Biklen (1998), Schwandt (1994), and Taylor and Bogdan (1984), I decided to use an approach grounded in symbolic interactionism to study the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions. This approach allowed me to gain a better understanding about the persistence experiences of GED recipients, how they define meanings, and how they shape their own realities. Furthermore, because of the focus on the individual actor (Blumer, 1969), symbolic interactionism allowed for a richer understanding of the symbolic world of GED recipients in four-year institutions from those who are experiencing it. Patton (1990) stated that researchers understand the symbolic world of the participants through close contact and direct interaction. In this study, the focus group, photo elicitation, and semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews allowed for close contact and direct interaction with the participants. These qualitative research methods informed my understanding of how the GED recipients perceive, interpret, and understand their persistence in four-year institutions.

Qualitative Research Methods

In the last two decades, qualitative research methods have received considerable attention from educational researchers. In qualitative methods, researchers study people in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Additionally, qualitative research methods allow the voices of underrepresented groups, such as the poor, women, minorities, and other non-majority groups, to be heard and perhaps better understood (Lincoln & Denzin, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990).

Patton (1990) compared the differences between qualitative and quantitative research. He stated, “Qualitative methods permit the evaluation researcher to study selected issues in depth and detail. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, require the use of a standardized approach so that the experiences of people are limited to certain predetermined response categories” (p. 165). In quantitative research, the sample typically includes a large number of subjects for data manipulation, whereas in qualitative research, the sample size typically includes a small number of participants for detailed analysis. An important, positive aspect of qualitative research is “that less is more. It is more important to work longer and with greater care with a few people, than more superficially with many of them” (McCracken, 1988, p. 17). Patton (1990) points out that in contrast to quantitative research methods, qualitative research methods produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people.

Qualitative research methods were selected for this study because of my desire to find deeper levels about the meanings of the persistence experiences of the GED recipients and to tell their stories from the participants’ perspectives. Further, the literature is lacking on the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions from the students’ perspectives. One

of the aims of this study was to produce information-rich data that provided a deeper understanding of the persistence experiences of GED recipients.

Blumer (as cited by Patton, 1990) referred “to qualitative inquiry as the only real way of understanding how people perceive, understand, and interpret the world” (p. 76). One of the aims of qualitative research is to understand the world from the perspectives of the participants whose world it is (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). In keeping with symbolic interactionism, the ways that the GED recipients made sense of their experiences and how they used those experiences to relate to the world around them was of importance to this research.

Although many benefits are associated with qualitative research methods, this methodology does have drawbacks. Qualitative methods do not allow for the use of standardized measures whereby responses are expressed in predetermined categories. Additionally, because qualitative research focuses on a wealth of detailed information from a small sample of individuals or cases, it is difficult to make generalizations (Quinn, 1987). In this study, I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the persistence experiences of students with a GED in four-year institutions from the perspectives of the participants. Therefore, qualitative research methods were the most appropriate method for this study. The following paragraphs provide information on the setting for data collection and the procedures that were employed to obtain information-rich data for this qualitative study.

Setting

Alpha University

Alpha University (AU) is a comprehensive institution offering baccalaureate degrees in forty-two (42) areas, master’s degrees in nineteen (19) areas, and doctoral degrees in two (2) areas. AU is located in south Louisiana (Alpha University Catalog, 2000). During Fall 2002

semester, the total headcount enrollment at AU was 9,449 (Alpha University Fact Book, 2002). As shown in Table 1, the total enrollment during this same time for GED recipients was 38, of which 20 students were African American females, 17 students were African American males, and one student was a White male (Alpha University Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research, 2002).

Table 1

AU Enrollment of GED Recipients by Classification, Race, and Gender, Fall 2002

	African American		White	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Freshman	7	7	0	1
Sophomore	5	5	0	0
Junior	5	3	0	0
Senior	3	2	0	0
Totals	20	17	0	1

As shown in Table 2, AU had 18 GED recipients ages 19 to 24 years and 20 GED recipients ages 25 years and older enrolled during Fall 2002 semester.

Table 2

AU Age of GED Recipients, Fall 2002

Age (in years)	19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-49
Number of GED recipients	1	17	14	0	3	3

Omega University

Omega University (OU), the pseudonym for the site at which this study was conducted, is an accredited Master's I Public University located in south Louisiana. It was founded in 1925 and currently offers associate, baccalaureate, and master's degrees. During Fall 2002 semester, the total headcount enrollment at OU was 15,195 (Omega University, 2002). As shown in Table 3, the total headcount enrollment for students who started as beginning freshmen in Fall 2000

through Fall 2002 was 5,498. Enrollment during this same time for GED recipients was 188.

This information was only available for students who started as beginning freshmen in Fall 2000 through Fall 2002 due to a change in the OU administrative systems (Omega University Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2002).

Table 3

OU Enrollment of GED Recipients by Classification and Race, Fall 2002

	African American	White	Other	Unknown
Freshman	11	133	7	3
Sophomore	1	26	1	1
Junior	0	3	0	2
Senior	0	0	0	0
Totals	12	162	8	6

OU consists of seven colleges, including the College of Basic Studies. This College houses the GED recipients upon their enrollment at the university. As shown in Table 4, the number of GED recipients enrolled at OU ages 17-24 years was 102, while the number of students who were 25 years and older was 86 (OU Office of Institution Research and Assessment, 2002).

Table 4

OU Age of GED Recipients, Fall 2002

Age (in years)	17-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-49	50 and over
Number of GED recipients	52	50	34	19	17	13	3

This study employed qualitative research methods to examine the persistence experiences of students with a GED enrolled at AU and OU from the perspectives of the students. Data were

collected from the pilot study, focus group interviews, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, photography, photo elicitation interviews, and document analysis of students' records (transcripts and ACT or SAT scores). Prior to engaging the participants in any part of this study, I obtained the approvals of the Delta University, the site of the pilot study, AU, and OU Institutional Review Boards. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) state that a critical step for conducting research is working with the "gatekeepers" of information to obtain the required permissions. Due to privacy regulations, the institutions could not provide me with a list of students who had earned their GED and were currently enrolled. Therefore, I had to post flyers on campus (see Appendix A for flyer) and place ads in the campus newspapers to attract participants for this study. The GED recipients participated in this study on a voluntary basis. This study provided an avenue for the voices of the GED recipients to be channeled through.

The Pilot Study

The main purpose of the pilot study was to ensure that the participants felt comfortable with the questions and they understood the questions. Additionally, the pilot study assisted me in ensuring that my interview guide was appropriate for addressing the key areas stated in the literature review. According to Janesick (1994),

the pilot study allows the researcher to focus on particular areas that may have been unclear previously. In addition, pilot interviews may be used to test certain questions....Thus the time invested in a pilot study can be valuable and enriching for later phases in the study (p. 213).

The semi-structured, in-depth interview guide was tested during the pilot study (see Appendix B for guide).

Setting

Delta University (DU), the pseudonym for the site at which the pilot study was conducted, is a comprehensive, university serving south, central Louisiana. DU is an accredited

institution and awards degrees at the associate, baccalaureate, master's, and specialist degree levels (DU website, 2002). The pilot study did not take place at the universities included in the main research study, AU and OU, due to the limited number of GED recipients enrolled at these institutions.

Sample

Qualitative research involves selecting people or sites that can help the researcher best understand a phenomenon (Creswell, 2002). In an effort to understand the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions, four GED recipients enrolled as full-time, freshmen (second semester), sophomores, juniors, or seniors during Spring 2003 were selected using snowball or chain sampling. Students who transferred from other institutions, including community colleges, were invited to participate in this study. The only stipulation was that the students had to be enrolled at DU for at least one year. Additionally, several employees of DU recommended GED recipients for the pilot study and an ad was placed in the DU campus newspaper. According to Patton (2002),

snowball or chain sampling is an approach for locating information-rich key informants or critical cases. The process begins by asking well-situated people: Who knows a lot about ____? Who should I talk to? By asking a number of people who else to talk with, the snowball gets bigger and bigger as you accumulate new information-rich cases (p. 176).

One of the drawbacks experienced with snowball or chain sampling was that the process for selecting participants took longer than I anticipated. Additionally, this type of sampling may have limited the number of respondents. Some of the students may have been overwhelmed with time and decided not to participate because they did not know how much time would be required for participation in this research study. Nonetheless, one of the reasons why snowball or chain sampling was an appropriate sampling technique for this research study was because of the

confidentiality regulations of higher education institutions. The GED recipients had to contact me for participation in this research study. Privacy regulations prevented me from directly contacting the students.

Procedures

Once the DU students were identified, interested students were requested to contact me via telephone, e-mail, letter, or personal contact. Once the students contacted me, I obtained information from the students using the Pre-Interview Form (see Appendix C for form). I thoroughly explained my research study and the extent of their participation. Additionally, a date, time, and location were scheduled for the interview that was comfortable for the participants.

The location for the interview was selected that was conducive for interviewing, such as an enclosed room at the university library or a place designated by the participants. Creswell (2002) stated that an interview location should be selected that is free from distractions and lends itself to using audio equipment. A cover letter detailing the interview process (see Appendix D for letter) and an informed consent form (see Appendix E for form) was reviewed and signed by the participants prior to the interview.

The data were collected using the semi-structured, in-depth interview technique to provide depth, detail, and a deeper meaning on the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions. In this type of interview, the researcher asks some questions that are open-ended and some that are closed-ended. According to Creswell (2002),

the advantage of this type of interviewing is that the predetermined close-ended responses can net useful information to support theories and concepts in the literature. The open-ended responses, on the other hand, can allow the participant to provide personal experiences that may be outside or beyond those identified in the close-ended options (p. 205).

Each participant was interviewed for approximately one hour using the pilot semi-structured, in-depth interview guide. The interview guide was used to facilitate participant discussion about the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions. Some probing occurred during the interview to gather details that were pertinent to the study. Creswell (2002) stated that probing may be used to obtain additional information, clarify a point, or expand on ideas.

In keeping with the ethical considerations of qualitative research, the identity of the students was protected (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The names of the interview participants were kept confidential. The first interview question on the interview guide served as an ice-breaker question. The ice-breaker question was used to make the participants comfortable and obtain a pseudonym for each participant. The participants were asked to tell me an adjective that defined them and began with the same letter as their first name. The participants are referred to by their selected adjectives throughout the remainder of this study.

With the consent of the research participants, the interview was audiotape recorded. A copy of the tape was made to avoid loss of data due to faulty equipment or other unforeseen problems. According to Patton (1990),

no matter what style of interviewing is used, and no matter how carefully one words interview questions, it all comes to naught if the interviewer fails to capture the actual words of the person being interviewed. The raw data of interviews are the actual quotations spoken by the interviewees. There is no substitute for these data (p. 347).

The audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Notes were taken during the interview of facial expressions, voice tones, or body movement as they occurred. These notes added description to the interview text. Once the audiotapes were transcribed, I listened to the tapes while reading the typed transcripts to make myself familiar with the data and to ensure that no data were omitted. The audiotapes were placed in a secure location.

Data Analysis

Sources of data were analyzed for content using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) constant comparative method. Based on Glaser and Strauss's (1967) method, Lincoln and Guba (1985) added operational refinements to the step-by-step procedure in an effort to arrive at concise comparisons of the qualitative data. This method involved the process of unitizing and categorizing information into emergent themes.

The data were divided into the simplest feasible units of information to define the categories. This process was repeated until all the data were broken up into units of information. Next, each piece of information was coded in such a way that the information was useful. For example, information from a participant during the focus group interview about faculty support was coded as follows: first two letters of the participants' pseudonym, FG, FS.

Once the information was divided into units and coded, the data were sorted using computer word processing (Microsoft Word) and spreadsheet (Microsoft Excel) software programs. I looked for reoccurring text that represented patterns. A file for each category was established. Interview text was extracted from the original interviews and placed into the file of the appropriate category. Each category was checked to ensure that it was internally homogeneous, externally heterogeneous and mutually exclusive. The categories were also checked to determine if relationships existed among categories. Unitizing and categorizing were continued until the sources were exhausted, the categories were saturated, regularities emerged, or over-extension occurred as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Thereafter, all the categories were reviewed several times to see if any data were omitted.

The data gleaned from the pilot study were informative and as such, I decided to include some of the findings in Chapter IV of this study. Additionally, this data informed my interview

guide for the semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The data collection, analysis, and verification procedures used in the pilot study were also used for Phase I and Phase II of this study.

Phase I Data Collection

Phase I data collection consisted of engaging the participants in focus group interviews using role-play. According to Patton (1990), during the focus group interview “participants get to hear each other’s responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say” (p. 335). The focus group interview was selected to give the GED recipients the opportunity to interact with each other and draw upon the experiences of each other as experiences were shared.

Sample

The sample consisted of three GED recipients enrolled at AU and three GED recipients enrolled at OU as full-time, freshmen (second semester), sophomores, juniors, or seniors during Spring 2003. These three participants at each university also participated in the semi-structured, in-depth interviews, photography, photo elicitation interviews, and document analysis of students’ records. At AU, all participants were African American males. At OU, two participants were White females and one participant was a White male. The samples were selected using convenience sampling and snowball or chain sampling. “In convenience sampling, the researcher selects participants because they are willing and available to be studied” (Creswell, 2002, p. 167). Although this sampling technique has low credibility, it is appropriate for this study. The GED recipients participated in this study on a voluntary basis. Initially, four GED recipients at each institution had confirmed their participation in the focus group interview. However, only three students at each institution participated. The next section describes the procedures that I employed to engage the participants.

Procedures

Volunteers were attracted to participate in this research study by posting flyers at the campuses and by placing ads in the AU and OU student newspapers inviting GED recipients to participate in this study. Once the interested students contacted me via telephone or e-mail, I thoroughly explained my research study and the extent of their participation. Additionally, I obtained information about the students using the Pre-Interview Form. The students were asked about their interest in a focus group interview. Once all of the participants confirmed their participation in the focus group, I scheduled a date, time, and location for the interview. A cover letter detailing the interview process (see Appendix F for letter) and an informed consent form (see Appendix G for form) were reviewed and signed by each participant prior to the interview. The students were requested to submit a copy of their college transcripts and ACT or SAT scores.

Role Play

The Phase I participants were involved in a focus group interview using role-play. The students assumed the role of other GED recipients on a mission to find out the persistence experiences of students with a GED in four-year institutions. According to Patton (1990),

role-playing puts the interviewee in the role of expert. They know something of value to someone else. This places the interviewer in the position of a novice, an apprentice. The “expert” is being asked to share his or her expertise with the “novice” (p. 319).

Seidman (1991) acknowledged that role-playing is fun. “The participant takes on a different voice, becomes animated in a way that he or she has not been until then” (p. 64).

During the focus group interview, I served as the “moderator,” as termed by Richard Krueger (as cited in Patton, 2002). The term “moderator” is preferred by Krueger instead of interviewer because “the interviewer has a specific function of moderating or guiding the

discussion” (p. 386). The students were requested to reflect on their experiences as they discuss their persistence. I asked a few questions to initiate the discussion (see Appendix H for guide).

Data Analysis

As described previously in the pilot study section, the focus group interviews were audiotape recorded, copied, transcribed verbatim, and placed in a secure location. Once the audiotapes were transcribed, I listened to the tapes while reading the typed transcripts to make myself familiar with the data and to ensure that no data were omitted. The data were analyzed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) constant comparative method.

Phase II Data Collection

Phase II data collection consisted of engaging the participants in semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews, photography, subsequent photo elicitation interviews, and document analysis of students' records. Initially, the semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews and document analysis were the only data collection procedures to be employed during this phase of the study. However, the photography procedure used during Phase II data collection provided such creative and rich information, that I decided to engage the participants of Phase III in photography and photo-elicitation interviews. A description of the sample and the data collection and analysis procedures follows.

Sample

The sample for Phase II data collection consisted of 10 GED recipients at AU and 10 GED recipients at OU. Three of the ten participants at each university participated in the focus group interviews also. These participants were enrolled as full-time, freshmen (second semester), sophomores, juniors, or seniors at AU and OU during Spring 2003. The sample at AU consisted of three African American females and seven African American males. At OU, the

sample consisted of one African American female, six White females, and three White males. The participants were selected using convenience and snowball or chain sampling techniques.

Procedures

As previously described in the Phase II data collection section, volunteers for this study were requested by posting and disseminating flyers at the campuses of AU and OU and an ad was placed in the campus student newspapers. Interested students contacted me via telephone or e-mail. Once the students contacted me, I thoroughly explained my research study and the extent of their participation. I also obtained information about the students using the Pre-Interview Form. Thereafter, I scheduled a date, time, and location for the interview. A cover letter detailing the interview process (see Appendix I for letter) and an informed consent form (see Appendix J for form) were reviewed and signed prior to the interview.

The individual interviews were conducted using the semi-structured, in-depth interview technique to provide depth, detail, and a deeper meaning on the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions. Each participant was interviewed for approximately one hour using the semi-structured, in-depth interview guide (see Appendix K). This interview guide included the clarifications and findings from the pilot study. The interview guide was used to facilitate participant discussion about the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions and some probing occurred to obtain additional information. At the end of the interview, I explained the photography component of this research study to each participant as described next.

Picture This

A distinctive aspect of this study is that photography was used as a means for data collection. Photography is commonly used with qualitative research. Photographs provide a good source of data, can vividly capture the setting for others, and can be creatively used to

study the perspectives of people (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Patton, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Interviews that are conducted about photographs are referred to as “photo elicitation interviews” (Harper, 1994, p. 410). These interviews are a variation of open-ended interviews (Harper, 1994). In this study, the participants produced photographs to visually represent their persistence experiences in four-year institutions and participated in photo elicitation interviews to describe their experiences.

At the end of the focus group interview, the participants were provided with a Fuji 27-exposure disposable camera with a built in flash and a 3-prong folder with pockets containing a form to record their thoughts (see Appendix L for form). According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998), “researchers use photographs to probe how people define their world” (p. 146). The participants were requested to take pictures that illustrated their persistence experiences or that helped to describe how they define their persistence experiences in four-year institutions. The participants were encouraged to record their thoughts in their folders as soon as they take the picture so that their impressions were not forgotten.

Once the cameras were returned to me, I had the photographs developed at either Wal-Mart or Walgreens Drug Store. Both locations have one-hour, on-site photo processing. This method for developing the photographs was used because I did not want to risk having the photographs lost or damaged. I requested double prints of the photos. One set was for the participant who took the photos. The other set was for my records and served as backup in case the participants’ pictures were lost or damaged. Once the photographs were returned to the participants, they were asked to review the pictures and, if necessary, make additional comments in their folder. The participants were requested to bring their photos and folders to the photo elicitation interview. The interviews began by requesting the participants to talk in detail about

why the photograph was taken and what the image meant to them. Some probing occurred to gather additional information.

Data Analysis

As described previously, the semi-structured, in-depth and photo elicitation interviews were audiotape recorded, copied, transcribed verbatim, and placed in a secure location. Once the audiotapes were transcribed, I listened to the tapes while reading the typed transcripts to make myself familiar with the data and to ensure that no data were omitted. The data were analyzed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) constant comparative method and member checking was completed to ensure accuracy and to provide the participants with an opportunity to make additional comments, as described in the next section.

Member Checking

The participants of this study were sent a copy of the transcribed interviews as a form of member checking. Creswell (2002) described member checking as “a process where the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account” (p. 280). This process may also cause the participants to recall new facts or enhance existing facts (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Each participant was requested to review the transcribed notes for accuracy and to contact me with any additions, deletions, or corrections. I was contacted by only one of the participants. She mailed the transcript back to me clarifying some of the comments she made during the interview.

I wanted to ensure that all of the participants had the opportunity to make additional comments, so I contacted each participant by telephone to find out if they had any other comments relative to the transcribed interviews. I took notes during the telephone conversations. In most cases, the participants declined the offer to read the transcribed notes because they stated

that they trusted me to accurately record the findings. Some of the participants stated that they simply did not have time to read through the detailed notes. Others did read the transcribed notes, but did not have any further comments.

Document Analysis

A part of the data collection procedures for this study was document analysis. Documents are public and private records about a site or participants that provide valuable sources of information in qualitative research (Creswell, 2002). According to Creswell, the first guideline for collecting documents in qualitative research is to “identify the types of documents that can provide useful information to answer the qualitative research questions” (p. 210).

In this study, the participants were requested to submit copies of their university transcripts and ACT or SAT scores to provide insight on the research questions. The research questions for this study are how do academic integration, social integration, time on task, and developmental education affect the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions? The participants’ transcripts and ACT or SAT scores were reviewed to provide insight on their persistence experiences in regards to academic integration, social integration, time on task, and the number of developmental educational courses taken.

Benefits for Participants

According to Creswell (2002), “careful attention to reciprocity or giving back to the participants will maintain ‘gains’ for both the researcher and the participant” (p. 532). The participants of this study received short-term and long-term benefits. A short-term benefit may have been that the confidence of the students will be enhanced as a result of serving as an “expert” on a major research project. Additionally, the students may have gained a greater understanding and hopefully an appreciation of their own experiences and the experiences of

other GED recipients enrolled in four-year institutions. The participants also received a \$10 gift card to Wal-Mart and a copy of the photographs that were taken. These gifts are not a payment for participation in the study, but are a small token of my appreciation for the contributions of the participants to this study.

The long-term benefit from participation in this study may be that the documented experiences of the students will hopefully serve as the impetus for implementing or enhancing policies or services that ensure the success of GED recipients enrolled in four-year institutions. Additionally, these students may be able to provide the AU and OU administrators with specific policy recommendations based on their personal experiences. This study may also serve as the impetus for these students to earn advanced degrees.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research requires an extensive amount of fieldwork with emphasis on accuracy and integrity of findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced four criteria to determine trustworthiness of findings. The criteria are “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.289-331). Some of these standards were used to demonstrate the “truth value” of this qualitative study. Research techniques such as prolonged engagement in the field and triangulation help to establish credibility. Additionally, thick descriptions are necessary to make sure that the findings are transferable.

Credibility

In qualitative research, the researcher is the major information gatherer. The credibility of qualitative inquiry is especially dependent on the credibility of the researcher primarily because the researcher is the instrument of data collection and the center of the analytical process

(Patton, 2002). Thus, the credibility of qualitative research depends heavily on the skill, competence and sensitivity of the one conducting the research study.

According to Patton (2002),

the credibility of qualitative inquiry depends on three distinct but related inquiry elements. The first element is rigorous methods for doing fieldwork that yield high-quality data that are systematically analyzed with attention to issues of credibility. The second element is the credibility of the researcher, which is dependent on training, experience, track record, status, and presentation of self. The third element is philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry, that is, a fundamental appreciation of naturalistic inquiry, qualitative methods, inductive analysis, purposeful sampling, and holistic thinking (p. 552-553).

The focus group, photo elicitation, and semi-structured, in-depth interviews and document analysis of students' records provided the "rigorous methods" for this research study that produced high quality data. Through these "rigorous methods," data triangulation occurred as described later in this chapter.

Transferability

Transferability refers to whether the findings from a study can be used in another context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Thick descriptions of the sending (the setting of the study) and the receiving (the one to which the study may be applied) contexts must be provided so that anyone who wants to embark on such research can access similarity and judge the transferability of findings. As recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability of this study was strengthened by verbatim interview quotes, providing thick descriptions while continuing to secure the anonymity of participants.

Dependability

To meet this criterion, the researcher must keep and provide evidence of the appropriateness of the inquiry decisions made. The investigator must keep in mind that possible changes occur over time in reporting results (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To assure dependability

of this study, the collection of data and dissemination of findings were carefully designed. Relevant materials, such as interview tapes, field notes, transcriptions, consent forms, procedural notes, and peer reviews, were organized to perform sound procedures as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Confirmability

Confirmability is attained by implementing clear strategies. In this study, a fair, balanced, and conscientious effort was made to document multiple perspectives, multiple realities, and multiple interests (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Also, the process for analyzing the data reinforced the neutrality of the results. The trustworthiness of the data was further established by using a process known as triangulation.

Triangulation

Patton (1990) stated that triangulating the data or using multiple methods to collect data adds quality and credibility to the research study. “Four kinds of triangulation can contribute to verification and validation of qualitative analysis: methods triangulation, triangulation of sources, analyst triangulation, and theory/perspective triangulation” (p. 556). In this study, methods triangulation was employed. Triangulation of methods involves “checking out the consistency of findings generated by different data-collection methods” (Patton, 1990, p. 464). While multiple sources were used to achieve triangulation for this study, the primary way was methods triangulation. Methods triangulation was achieved through the interviews, focus group, semi-structured, in-depth, and photo elicitation, and photography. These data gathering methods provided for the triangulation of data and assured the richness of the data representing the phenomenon under study. The richness of the data will, in part, be presented in the next chapter using narratives.

Narratives

Narratives are lived stories, “individual and collective, retold and reconstructed to tell versions of an experience” (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, p. 64). Narratives allow the researcher to collect and tell stories about the lives of people, write stories of individual experiences in the individuals’ dialect, and provide thick description (Creswell, 2002). In addition, narratives are a good way to tell the essence of the lived experiences of people because narratives are “a representation and explanation of social reality that is communicated through various story structures” (Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996, p. 763).

Although narratives have many strengths, this approach to presenting qualitative data does have some weaknesses. Creswell (2002) stated that the process of the participants telling their story to the researcher and the researcher telling the story in a report is labor intensive. Moreover, when presenting data in a narrative form, there is a question of whether or not the participant’s voice is lost in the final report. According to Creswell (2002), “it is possible for the report to reflect the researcher’s story and not the participant’s story” (p. 532). The latter weakness was addressed in this research study by “using extensive participant quotes and the precise language of the participants” (p. 532). The narrative was the most appropriate way to introduce the participants of this study and tell their stories.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the methods that were employed for this study. The research design, theoretical framework, data collection, data analysis, and integrity of the data procedures used to address the research questions were discussed. The procedures that were employed in this study provided detailed, in-depth information about the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions. Through the use of narratives, the next chapter provides an

introduction to those who made this research possible, the GED recipients enrolled at DU, AU, and OU. These shared stories provided rich evidence of the diverse persistence experiences of GED recipients in four-year institutions.

CHAPTER 4

THE PERSISTERS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain an awareness and appreciation of the persistence experiences of students with a GED in four-year institutions. This chapter provides an introduction to the ones who made this research possible, the GED recipients enrolled at DU, AU, and OU. The following paragraphs are the stories of each participant using the voices of the participants as constructed by the researcher. This information was taken directly from the pilot study and semi-structured, in-depth interview transcripts using the adjectives that the participants selected to define themselves.

The portrayal of the participants may facilitate an image to associate with each individual. The initial description listed is in response to the statement by the interviewer: tell me about yourself. Other comments are responses to the following questions: (1) Why did you leave high school and what was the last grade of high school completed? (2) Tell me about the role of education in your life. (3) Have you thought about quitting college? What makes you not quit? (4) What are your future goals? (5) What is success for you? I decided to introduce the reader to the individuals who participated in the pilot study conducted at Delta University. Their lived experiences are just as compelling as the participants of the main research study conducted at Alpha and Omega Universities.

The Pilot Study

Active

I'm ready to get out of school and start making money. I like to read. I really don't do that much, not with those people who go out and party, nothing like that. I just want to get out of

school and start making money. That's the most important thing to me right now. Education is really important to me. I always wanted to go to college whenever I got out of high school. Things were just really kind of just strange for me. I wasn't good in that type of environment, but I just knew that I wanted to go to college. It took me a little while out there. I quit school [high school] to go back and get my GED, but after I got it, I came straight to DU. It's important to me that I do this. Whenever I was in high school, I was a lot bigger than what I am right now. They had just started that new rule where you had to tuck your shirt and this and that and I felt uncomfortable doing that because I wasn't a huge person, but I was big and I just felt uncomfortable with the way I looked with my shirt tucked in. Well, our principal at the time just kind of harassed me about it one day. She followed me to my classes and then she was finally waiting for me outside of one of my classrooms to make sure that my shirt was tucked in. I guess she warned me three or four times. My shirt wasn't tucked in and we kind of got into a little argument and stuff like that. She told me that the best thing for me was to quit school and maybe try an alternative school or go, you know, somewhere else in a different environment. So I just got really angry that day and I quit school. I just quit in the 11th grade. I decided to get my GED because I wanted to go to college. I wanted to get an education. I know you can make it in this world without having an education but you have to struggle and I know that I don't want to struggle for anything.

I never thought about quitting college, not since I've been in college, not even on the bad days. I don't quit because I have so many people counting on me. I have a lot of people standing behind me so I have not only to do it for them, but for me too.

My future goal is to graduate in high standing. I just recently brought up my GPA and I made the honor roll and stuff like that. I'm hoping to finish in high standings. I'm going to

graduate like that. I've really done great. Success for me is just completing everything that I'm aiming for right now and being able to do it and being able to show people, hey I did it.

Active, a 22 year old White female, is a sophomore majoring in respiratory therapy.

Active has a 3.0 cumulative GPA.

Bassy

I'm a 45 year old divorced woman. I have three of my own children. I have one foster child. The oldest is 28 years old. I have a 20 year old, 18 year old, and my nephew is 13 years old. I live alone. I'm going for a 4-year degree. I enjoy being at school. I work at night from 2 am to 6:30 in the morning every night. I get to school about 8:30 am on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I'm just really busy and I enjoy being busy and it's fun and older students rule at college. They do. It's different. It's really fun. I just like school and I enjoy doing it. I'm a happy person.

Education is playing a major role because education does something to you. It makes you hang around people that talk about the same stuff you talk about and an ordinary person just doesn't do that. You start talking about things that you're learning and they can't comprehend a lot of things, you know? I quit high school because I got pregnant and got married. I wasn't a straight A student and I had just finished my 11th grade. I was in the honor society and I didn't want to miss my whole senior year. I didn't want to lose what I had learned, so I went to get my GED right after I had my baby.

I thought about quitting college after my first semester. It was very overwhelming because I just got finished raising a kid, and I'm going into college. It just, it blew my mind because my brain was not use to that much expansion. It was sort of a stress, studying and I didn't know how to study. Learning how to study helped me because I was just trying to

memorize stuff. I don't quit because I like the people here so much, the students, the teachers, the faculty, the cooks in the cafeteria, and the workers in the yard. Because you're older, you have a tendency to be more friendlier than the younger students. I really like the people here. They're very good people.

Education is just such a great thing. It makes you a better person. It just does something to you. You have a tendency to look more in-depth at the way the world is. It just made me look at things more. It enlightened me a whole lot. My future goal is to get in some kind of criminal justice government job with my sociology degree. I would like to earn a sociology degree so that I can understand why people do the things they do. You know I want to learn how to do this because criminal justice is really growing because more and more people are getting put in jail. I may get an advanced degree.

Bassy, a 45 year old White female, is a freshman majoring in government. Bassy has a 3.5 cumulative GPA.

Jockey

It's my duty to finish college and maybe go to law school. I was kicked out of high school because I was accused of something I didn't do while really participating in class. I was told to go to the office. A last chance scenario was given to me which I think was wrong and it resulted in me being kicked out of school when I really wanted to be there and learn. I hated the last warning which was to fully threaten me and I defended myself. I was railroaded out by an assistant principal who gave me a last warning. I hated it. I made perfect grades, A's. There were teachers commenting on it, but there was this one teacher who just didn't look up and said John go to the office so, that's why I ended up out of school. I was prepared to stay and make the rest of my life easier by completing college and going on to graduate school, but that

opportunity was taken away from me and so I had to go to work. I didn't decide. I didn't want to. I was kicking and screaming all the way.

I vowed to steal my education back, so I went to work and years later when my graduating class was graduating, I came in from working offshore like a man to watch them all in the stadium graduating and you know tears did come. Tears came to my eyes and I vowed to steal my education back. I had my face severely crushed and while I was healing, I thought the most positive thing that I could do with my life was to use that time to get the GED. I got the GED and that finally allowed me to be able to go to college. I went to college the first time in '89 and I left before the semester was up because it was something I wanted to do but I wasn't able to do because of having to support myself. I came to DU years ago and I quit right before the semester was over and went on to Miami. Then work got in the way and life got in the way.

I had a successful business that I sold because I had a daughter and I wanted to be near her. I invested \$650,000 in a campground which was a failure, but it was OK because I was able to raise this infant daughter of mine from birth to three years old. For her and for me, I'm determined to finish school this time. I did well last semester and I'm planning on doing well this one. At my age in school, it seems like everybody's 19, you know not really having anyone to study with, which would help a lot, so you do everything on your own.

The role of education is not as a teacher put it last semester, "All of ya'll are here for economic reasons, so that you can come out and make a lot of money." That is absolutely why I'm not here. I'm here because I am sick and tired of all my life asking advice and being told well, you might check with so-and-so, or this department might know. And I've never gotten an answer without a lot of research and only through my own work that I ever find out the true answer. I am in search of knowing, not guessing.

Quitting is not an option. Because of chain of events throughout my life and my hatred towards attorneys, I feel I have to become one to balance the scales. It's my duty, not only a wish, but it's more of a duty that I finish and make a difference for our state. You know it's hard to love your state when you're frustrated about it. I want to get a law degree to balance the scales a little bit because I would like to lobby for changes. I'd like to help the uninformed in our state. Won't make any money, but I'll at least be doing what I want to do.

Jockey, a 42 year old White male, is a freshman majoring in government. Jockey has a 2.0 cumulative GPA.

Sexy

I'm the mother of four. I got married at 16 years old. At 21 years old, I had 4 children. I quit school the third week after my junior year because I thought that all I wanted to do is get married and have a bunch of babies, which I did. I remember the exact time and day I made the decision. I thought that all I was meant to do was have children and that would be it. I got very involved with my children and their education. Both of my daughters attend DU. I have always been a sponge for knowledge. Education opens so many doors.

My first day of school here at DU, I thought that I knew pretty much everything, rude awakening. There wasn't a whole lot that I did know, and there was so much more to learn. I am very active with my children and their education, and putting a dream in their hearts. I try to be positive to make them realize that we pretty much design our destiny, and it is up to them through education. I feel strongly that education is the road to take. It's education that betters life. I felt like this was an important step for my life and foremost to set an example for my children. Secondly, I want to become an advocate for children and make a difference in their lives.

I remember being in a crowd of peers and they were talking about someone that had dropped out of school. My husband made the comment, not to hurt me, but yeah, “You know Sexy’s a high school dropout, too.” That word, that phrase hit me like a ton of bricks. It just opened my eyes and I realized what I had sacrificed. That comment was made 21 years ago, on a Sunday. On Monday, I called to sign myself up for the GED. Luckily I didn’t have to do night school. I went in, took the GED test and passed it.

I think about quitting school every morning I get here and have to take an exam. But, the funny thing is that when I do orientation something that I share with all the non-traditional students is that there are going to be so many times you’re going to ask yourself, “what am I doing here? I’m going to quit.” I tell them to remember every day that you have to tell yourself that quitting is not an option. It’s simply not an option. Don’t even go there. You’re gonna make it. Hook or crook, you’re gonna make it. So you can’t even think along those lines. So anytime I start like getting really tired, I’ve been up all night studying for exams, I’m trying to do bookwork for my job, and juggle grandkids, I tell myself quitting is not an option. This is a goal that I’m going to attain. There’s no quitting. I refuse to fail. I refuse to fail, and quitting would be failing. It really would be. It would be giving up, and I refuse to do that. You know I’m in it for the long haul. I don’t know how many years that will be. I’ll probably be a professional student.

I’m going to save the children of the world, one at a time. I want a criminal justice associates and I want a legal studies associates, and a major in government. Then from there, if the Lord wills it, I would love law school. Absolutely, I’m going to eventually be 50 something years old anyway, why not? I want to become a child advocacy attorney. I’m having the time of my life. I am determined. I have a set of goals. I am determined to even be a nominee for the

hall of famer during my senior year, absolutely. I will be in the history of DU. A little poor girl who thought that she couldn't. I feel like the little red engine. It's an amazing thing. It's almost like we robbed ourselves too and that an education was more valuable than we realized. As you grow older you just realize that it is important.

Sexy, a 39 year old White female, is a sophomore majoring in government. Sexy has a 3.8 cumulative GPA.

Alpha University

Beautiful

I am a native of California, but I was raised here in Baton Rouge. I work at Wal-Mart and have been there for three years. I have been at Alpha University two and a half years. I had to sit out a semester. Education is very important for me because I get to better myself. I am the first of eight grandchildren, and I will be the first to graduate from college. My achievement would be to make my family proud.

I earned my GED because I was home schooled. My mama wanted to try it for a year and we ended up doing it for three years. It was very, very, very boring. In order for me to get back into the public school, I would have to take a test and I do not like tests at all. So I decided to just go with the flow. I felt like whatever you want to do, Mama. I just went with it.

Every now and then I think about quitting college when it just seems a little difficult for me to get through my classes, especially when I have to work and I have to struggle from going to school to going straight to work. By the time I get home, I can't do my homework. I'm too tired. Failing a couple of classes just made me want to give up.

My parents are making me go to college. But I realize that you can't get too far with just a high school diploma. You might be able to do something else but, without a degree, you can't

make that much money. I want to make more money so I could pay my bills and be able to give my parents something for making me go to school. Some parents just don't care.

My future goal is to be successful in whatever I decide to do, to be the best at what I like to do, and not just being something that is going to make a lot of money.

Success for me would be graduating from college.

Beautiful, a 21 year old African American female, is a sophomore majoring in architecture. Beautiful has a 2.50 cumulative GPA.

Bold

I would describe myself as somewhat arrogant, brave, and belligerent. I'm 24 years old and a disabled veteran. I used to jump out of airplanes in the military. I was in an infantry unit. I was a student at McKinley High in the gifted and talented program. I am the assistant manager for a home supply store. I've been a chemical blender at a chemical plant that makes oil and things of that nature. I'm a very diverse person, a person who picks up on things quickly. Sometimes I allow my perception of my intellectual level to overshadow what another person's perception might be. I think that I'm smarter than the teacher, or I'm quicker on my feet than the teacher and I can get over on them. Sometimes that kind of gets me in trouble.

My mother is a chemistry and biology teacher. She is the head of the science department at Smallville County High School [pseudonym]. She has her master's degree. Education played a big role in where I'm at today and what I know today. I retained the knowledge in high school. I was getting the concepts, but saw homework as busy work and it was something that turned me off. If you gave me a test, I would score high on the test, above average, consistently.

I quit high school because I didn't meet the requirements to graduate. I was three courses shy of getting my diploma. I would have had to go back to school for another year to finish. I

wasn't going to go back the next year. I was a B/C student. I was a national merit semifinalist. I didn't want to go back to school the next year and have to face the people who were behind me. I didn't want it to look like I had to repeat a grade, and because of the gifted talented program, I couldn't go to another school. So, I just left school. I was lazy, too.

It wasn't that I couldn't do it. If I would have gone back the next year, I could have completed it. I got to the point where it would have been too embarrassing to go back and my pride took over. My guidance counselor told me about the 3 courses that I needed, but my last two semesters, I was just buck wild. I was working, had money in my pocket, had a Cutlass [car], and then I started messing around on the streets. I already didn't like to do homework. I was in a single parent home and my mother worked out of state, she wasn't there to check up on me like she needed to. That allowed me the space or the freedom to be myself.

I didn't attend the GED program. I never took a prep exam or nothing. I just went to the center and said that I want to take the GED. I took the test, blew it out of the water, 99th percentile. After earning my GED, I went into the military. I had to do the infantry thing, the airborne thing.

There isn't anything that anyone could do right now that would stop me from going to school. There is nothing in this world that is harder than the military, nothing. I refuse to quit college because I know what's out there. Knowing that if I quit college today, I go back to totally depending on my job. I have a very decent job. I make very good money, but there's always that feeling of insecurity. You never know what tomorrow holds, and especially with the stock market being unstable, with the way the economy is going right now, you could be laid off, anything could happen. A college degree just puts you in another level. You have the working class and you have people with college degrees.

These days a bachelor's degree is like a high school diploma. If you don't have a college degree, you don't start off at \$30,000 a year, you start off at \$8.00 per hour, \$9.00 per hour, or \$10.00 per hour. You get a job at Georgia Pacific, get a job at Exxon that starts you off at \$13.00 per hour and you feel like you are living it up.

I figured that I can invest 4 years of time and have the ability to start making \$60, \$65, or \$70 thousand, because I do have the understanding and the ability to graduate at the top 5% of my class. I have that ability, but if I don't use it, I may look back 20 years from now and say, I could have been the one running Entergy or I could have been the one working as the chief engineer at River Bend, making \$250 to \$300 thousand per year. I don't want to look back and that be the case.

My future goals are to have my bachelor's degree within the next 3 years and to go out into the business world or the job field. I want to find a job that will allow me to work towards my master's while I am employed. I consider myself a success because I'm a black assistant manager, the only black assistant manager in my warehouse. I'm 24 years old, the other managers are around 45 years old. I was a success in the military. I was 19 years old and getting ready to be a non-commissioned officer. I was a success in high school because I made one of the highest scores in the school on the ACT during my 11th grade. I've always been a success. I've had set backs, but I've always been a success. I'll be successful here because my mind is focused and I have tunnel vision. I do have other obligations, but school is my main obligation. This is what my time has been directed toward. The military actually helped my work ethic. Now I have the drive to do the homework, complete the task, make the As and Bs.

Bold, a 24 year old African American male, is a freshman majoring in electrical engineering. Bold has a 3.81 cumulative GPA.

Courteous

I was a student athlete in high school. During my senior year I wasn't going to be able to play football, or do any other activities, so I had to either get my GED to go to college or spend my senior year and not do anything. All of my friends were leaving, so I decided to get my GED. Prior to getting my GED, I got a scholarship offer to play football at a junior college in Wisconsin, so I took it. I was in school working on my GED. I didn't like the school, so I quit, but didn't have my GED yet.

When I got back home, I continued trying to get my GED. It was harder than I ever thought it would be. It took a lot of time and studying to try and get it. That got to me. I had a lot of people motivating me to keep on. I had to take the test four times before I passed it. It takes a lot of people motivating you to keep you going. I had given up, but my former coaches, my wife, my mom, and my sisters were all motivating me during the time that I was working on my GED. I actually got my GED in 2000.

My education plays a very important role because in the last three years, I learned more than I ever had known in high school. High school was a big joke to me and I was just there. The teachers knew me and I was getting grades because I was playing sports and I knew everybody in my town. My uncle was one of my teachers and he knew all of the other teachers, so high school was a joke.

Being that I'm in college now, I see things differently. You can think that you know something, but when you actually learn the correct way of doing it, then it is like, oh that's how it is. Being that I am in therapy recreation, I want to help old people. I was raised by my grandmother and I helped her a lot. I can draw on some of the things that we learn. I can say oh, I was doing that and I didn't even know or this is what I was doing and did not know the correct name for it.

I have never thought about quitting college, not one time. The things that I want to do make me not quit. I want to go back and do something for the kids. Thinking about what I'm going to do with my degree and how far I can go with it is motivating for me and I don't want to hear any negativity from folks back home, so that's why I keep going.

My future goals are to have a youth after school program and an elderly daycare center. After I get my bachelors degree, I may think about a master's degree. After the bachelors, the sky is the limit.

Courteous, a 23 year old African American male, is a junior majoring in therapeutic recreation. Courteous has a 2.20 cumulative GPA.

Determined

I'm laid back, outgoing, honest, and very social. I like to travel and go places. The world of education is important. I am the only one in my immediate family to go to college and the first to graduate. It's important to accomplish a job. I feel like a well-rounded person because of knowledge. Knowledge is just powerful and you can do anything with an education.

My mother is special. I have an older brother who was in special classes, so my mother put me in the special class when I was in the 5th grade. From then on, I was always in there. I didn't ever question her; I just thought that this is where I am supposed to be. I did not think that I was a slow learner until that is what people used to tell me. Friends and so forth used to tell me that "you in special ed, so you are slow." That's when I started thinking, well, I guess I am slow.

I completed 12 years of high school, but did not get a diploma because I was in the special ed classes. My high school did not have the GED prep classes. I didn't know nothing about college. Since I was in those classes, college was something that wasn't heard of—people in special ed going to college.

A teacher suggested I start college. I started at a community college and they found out that I didn't have a diploma. They told me that in order to stay in the regular classes, I had to get a GED. So I studied for the test, took it, and I passed it. I got my GED the first year at the junior college.

I thought about quitting college in the beginning. When I got there, I was in a bad financial situation. I wasn't doing good in classes, so I thought that this might not be for me. I wasn't having no family support or nothing. I felt like I just wasn't worthy of this, like I just couldn't handle it. It is really not for me. At the time, all of this was making me just want to stop, but I didn't. I knew I didn't want to go back to the environment that I came from. I wasn't going back there. My mind is set, I'm not going back out there on the streets like my friends. That's how I made it. My mind was set. I just refused to go back to the streets, to the drug infected environment and gangs. It's not a good environment to live in.

After graduation I plan on taking the Praxis test and start teaching in the day time and taking graduate school courses at night. Success for me is accomplishing goals and when I graduate, that's going to be a success.

Determined, a 25 year old African American male, was a senior majoring in psychology at the time of this study. Determined graduated during Summer 2003 with a 2.52 cumulative GPA. He is currently teaching young children.

Gifted

I'm just a simple person, not really into crowds. At this stage of my life, I'm just basically about simplicity. I like staying at home, relaxing, reading a little bit, but not too much.

Education plays one of the most important roles in my life because I come from a family that's basically had no formal education. My mom didn't graduate high school and my father

didn't either. So, for me, education was the last step. I tried everything in my life, all kinds of odd jobs, and numerous activities, but it all led back to education.

I left high school because of peer pressure. All of my friends were leaving school early and getting into the GED program. Everybody was doing it, so I just went ahead and did it too. I failed a year and was expelled a year, so I was behind two years. I would have been graduating two years later and the GED program allowed me to graduate with my class. I wanted to graduate with my class, so I got in the GED program.

When I first enrolled in college, I didn't stay in a dorm. I tried to get housing, but I didn't fill out the proper financial aid forms. The first semester, I had to pay out of my pocket. I didn't have the money to pay for housing and tuition, so it was like one or the other. I just felt like hey, it's either going to be this, or I'm going to go back home. It was either going to be now or never for me.

My first semester, I slept in my car. Sometimes, one of my friends would break his bed down and let me sleep on the floor in his room. I did use his room to shower. I was a little older, as a freshman, so I didn't really get the full aspect of a freshman experience that a lot of people get.

I never thought about quitting college. I don't think that anybody I could have encountered would have made me stop. I was just hungry and so determined. The death of my friend was like the beginning of it. At first, I was thinking I'm going to do this for him. This is something he started. He saw a better way. I felt bad because my friend would always come and talk about his college experiences. I'd would tell him that if it's so good, what are you doing sitting out here with us, drinking and smoking? But I really didn't realize that he did see a better way. So, there is nothing that I think that would ever stop me. It was something that once I started, I knew I had to finish. I had started out trying other things. Instead of high school, I

went the easy way and got a GED. I didn't realize it at the time, but, I quit that. I went to Job Corp after getting my GED. I started that and didn't finish. I started trade school in diesel mechanics and quit that. I knew that I had to finish something I started.

I refuse to quit college because I am afraid of being the person I was. Whatever I start now, I want to finish. I just want to see the end of it. I thought about getting my PhD and teaching on the college level as a part-time professor. I am thinking about mental health counseling, health care administration, or public administration. I'm really not sure, so I'm taking the summer off and I'm going to do a little more research .

Gifted, a 30 year old African American male, was a senior majoring in therapeutic recreation at the time of this study. Gifted graduated during Spring 2003 with a 3.09 cumulative GPA.

Hilarious

I'm a funny person and a nice person to be around. I am very friendly. I usually get along with anybody. I quit high school in the 11th grade because I failed an English class. I had to come back the next year and I failed it again. I went to summer school and I failed it again, so I just stopped. I was tired of going to school, so I just gave up on it. Until I was trying to go to a technical school and was told that I had to have a high school diploma or GED, so I decided to get my GED.

Before I started college, I was working with my father painting houses. He would always tell me how I need to get an education to better myself. At that time, I did not want anything to do with school, until one day it just hit me that I needed to better myself. Education has taken a very important role in my life and that is why I came to Alpha University.

I thought about quitting college a little bit. The stress from final exams and not doing well in school makes me want to quit. But, quitting is just a little thought, just a passing thought.

I am not going to quit. I'd really be embarrassed about flunking out. I don't want to flunk out. I want to stay in school, try and make better grades so my parents would be happy for me. I like to see the smile on their faces.

Since I started school, I made a lot of friends. I like playing sports, like football and running track. That also motivates me to make better grades so I can continue playing sports. Two of my friends have graduated from college. Seeing them walk across the stage motivated me. I see myself doing the same thing in a few years. My future goal is to get a degree so that I can coach little kids in football and to do everything that I want to do.

Hilarious, a 23 year old African American male, is a sophomore majoring in therapeutic recreation. Hilarious has a 1.73 cumulative GPA.

Multi-talented

I'm 36 years old, mother of three, grandmother of one. I got pregnant in my junior year of high school and I was so embarrassed that I dropped out and did not want to go back. At the time that I was supposed to graduate, I went ahead and took the GED because it was the next best thing. At that time, preparation classes were not required, so I took it and passed it the first time. Thereafter, I went to work for the state at 17 years old.

Education is very important. I married young. I was 18 years old when I got married and my husband had a really good job. We had the kids, and then when we got divorced. I always wanted to go to college, so I did attempt college during my marriage, but my husband just wasn't with that. He didn't support me, so I went for one semester and I dropped.

That was one of my goals in life, to go to college and finish. My kids have always said that they didn't need to go to college because I did just fine without college and I wanted to change their thinking about that. I've always wanted to go to college and this was actually my

first opportunity to come back to school and rigorously pursue my four-year degree. So, I'm not doing it in bits and pieces any more, I'm actually a full-time student and a full-time employee.

I never thought about quitting college, never, not for a moment, not even when I had to stand in a long line for registration. I just love school. When I have a full load, homework, and I'm taking off to study, my co-workers always wonder why I don't take a correspondence course. I keep telling them that I like the traditional college setting. I'm a classroom person, that's just my personality. I love learning and I love school. I probably will go on to pursue my master's in public administration.

I already consider myself a success. I'm a successful mother, a successful employee, and a successful student. Initially, I wanted a certain GPA, now it's like I want to graduate, not with a 2.0 of course, but I've kind of lowered my standards for myself as far as the GPA. I feel successful everyday. Everyday when I get up and do what is expected of me in all of my roles, I am a success.

Multi-talented, a 36 year old African American female, is a junior majoring in psychology. Multi-talented has a 3.29 cumulative GPA.

Noble

I'm an honest person and I try to be reliable to those who need me to be. I'm an intelligent person. I feel that I grow stronger every day through the hardships that I go through because every day is a challenge for me. I still have a lot of weaknesses that I'm trying to acknowledge and notice, but I am getting there. I'm at that point where I'm figuring things out that I know I need to figure out and know for the future.

As a college student, you're competing for a top spot and if you don't compete, you're going to fail. The challenge for me is not just school, it is every day life. Everything that comes

towards me that tries to threaten or tries to change the person that I'm trying to be. I mean those are the things that are more challenging. I have old friends that come to me and try to get that old person out of me and I have to stand up to them and resist them. I've been doing that for quite awhile now. I would say that it has been almost every day that I've resisted a lot of things that I couldn't really resist years ago.

Education is very important. It is going to get me where I want to be. Education to me is life. If you don't want to work a deadbeat job, you need an education. You need to know it's not just getting jobs, it's just being a better person. Knowledge can make you superior. Knowledge to me is just getting to that place where you want to be. I don't want to continue to work the same job I'm working right now. I want a better job. I want a job that I want to do, not that I have to do.

I didn't go to high school. I left school in the 8th grade because of financial problems with my family and my parents couldn't afford it. There was other things in my family that I was going through. We were really going through. My parents had conflicts between them. I've had guys come to me and talk to me about the GED, but because of my position and my mind was set on my position, and I was loving that position at the time, and didn't want to do nothing else. I was just stuck on that and I didn't want to move on.

When my friend, who was at LSU as an athlete, was shot dead, I had a talk with my family because I could not do this anymore. I got to move on. I can't be like this. This is not who I am. I've got to make something happen. I kind of became home schooled by myself and my family helping me out and that's what carried me on to the GED.

Some people that don't really like me told me that I'm not supposed to be in this position, in college. I'm supposed to be dead right now. I'm supposed to be on the corner right now

getting ready to die or just on that way. I'm not supposed to be where I'm at right now. They said that they didn't expect me to even be close to going to college.

I still have the thoughts. It still goes through my head especially when I have to read 50 pages, answer the questions, and answer more questions for biology lab or Spanish. I always think about quitting. When I fail a test and then I fail again, and then I fail again, I just want to walk away. Then those voices come in my head and say "you know there are so many things that you want to do in my life, and you just can't quit." I couldn't do that because I've been through too much to even go through that again. I actually can't quit.

When I look at my certificate from making the dean's list my first semester, that makes me not want to quit or when I see my nephew. He tells me all the things he wants to do. I know what will happen if I do quit because I have quit before. I already know what I will go through if I do quit and I'm not intending on making it happen. Plus I have people in my life that won't let me go down that road.

I call myself a success everyday. Even when I fail, I say I'm a successful man, and in honors. Receiving that honors certificate was the highest point of my life. I walked on that floor, on that plastic mat and I actually told myself, this is amazing, man, I cannot believe this. I said, I'm good. I'm really good. I am so good. I plan to go to graduate school and I want to be in the entertainment business. I'm finding out right now what I need to do to get to that point.

Noble, a 29 year old African American male, is a freshman majoring in mass communications. Noble has a 2.57 cumulative GPA.

Self-motivated

I'm 27 years old and I'm a mother of four children. I will graduate this summer in biology education. I enjoy cooking, reading books, listening to music, and relaxing.

Education to me was a pathway in which to overcome a lot of boundaries within my life. It was a way for me to not be subjected to fit the “statistical” teen mom. I wanted better for myself and I wanted better for my children. I left high school in the 11th grade because I was pregnant with my first daughter and I had a lot of problems at home. I left school as a straight A student to get away from the environment that I was in. Because I was pregnant then with my second child, I didn’t want to go through the pressure of going back to high school pregnant again. I just decided to skip that part and just try to get my GED to go on to something else.

I’ve had a lot of negative interactions but I don’t think anything has been that serious to make me want to quit school because I’m more motivated by the love of my children to keep going than anything. I’ve never thought about actually quitting school. I have thought at times that I need to go to another school, but never completely quitting school.

The fact that I am a role model to my children and I want to do better keeps me going. Two of my children are girls and they look to me to know what to do. I do a lot of things based on how they are going to perceive what I do and how it may affect their thinking. So, what my children have learned from me, through my six years here at Alpha University, is that their mom is not a quitter. So, I’m training them not to be quitters either.

My future goal is to be a science teacher and I’ve already accepted a job at a middle school. One day, I am considering going to law school to pursue a degree in educational law and hopefully build my own house one day. I want to have a lot of background for my kids, so when they decide to go to college, it will be much easier for them than it was for me.

Success for me is walking across the stage in my cap and gown, going off to graduation, starting my new job a week later, and knowing that I’m fulfilling some part of my dream for my

future. Despite everything I've been through in my life, knowing that I made it this far is success for me.

Self-motivated, a 27 year old African American female, was a senior at the time of this study majoring in secondary education. Self-motivated graduated during Summer 2003 with a 2.71 cumulative GPA.

Wise

I am wise, smart, and cagey. I'm just me. As of right now, education is the most important thing because it was taken away. I was supposed to graduate from high school, a private high school, but my father didn't pay the bill so I couldn't get my transcript. That's the reason I went and got a GED in the first place. I couldn't go back to my old school and get my transcript so that I could get in at another high school, and then get into college. So I had been languishing for about 4 years doing diddly squat.

I thought about quitting college during the first week when I was dead tired and on a Saturday I could not get up. I was like, oh I can't take this. I must have rolled out of bed around 10:00 a.m. and I was supposed to have a 10:00 a.m. class that Saturday, but I dropped it. There was no way I would have been able to be up here for 10:00 a.m. on a Saturday. I thought about quitting for a split second, then I said nah. The thought of sitting around in my apartment doing absolutely diddly squat like the rest of the people gives me motivation to keep going.

My future goal is to go to graduate school and make lots and lots of money. I want a master's degree. The only Ph.D. that I can get now is in art history. I'm kind of digging psychology. I might go to graduate school for both. I was thinking that I could go to law school, too. I might do all of them. I want to do everything. I want to be an artist; I want to be an entrepreneur; I want to do all of these kinds of things.

I have no idea when success is or what that is. I don't know if I can say where, when or whatever. It's just that I guess I'll know whenever I feel I've made it that far. I don't think there is any way I can describe that.

Wise, a 25 year old African American male, is a junior majoring in fine arts who has been diagnosed with club hands. Wise has a 3.03 cumulative GPA.

Omega University

Caring

I was born in West Virginia. I came to New Orleans with my mother in 1948. I married very young, at 14 years old, had a baby, got a divorce, and four years later I married again. My second marriage lasted twelve years with two children. I had altogether three girls. And, after twelve years of marriage, we divorced and I started working in the hospitals as a sitter in New Orleans at various hospitals. I dropped out of high school because I was being shuffled from West Virginia to New Orleans by my parents. My father was in West Virginia and my mother was in New Orleans and although I liked the schools in West Virginia better, I still wanted to be with my mother as well. I was just tired of the tugging back and forth , so I got married.

My mother lived next door so she cared for my children while I worked mainly the night shift. I went to the Salvation Army and Goodwill and bought as many textbooks as I could find that I could afford, and read them and studied them every night whenever I could. I studied to be a paramedic. I did that twice. Once in Metairie and when I moved to West Virginia, I went to school at the West Virginia University there as well, even without a high school diploma.

In New Orleans I had worked for three years in the emergency room. I did enjoy the other medical field, but I moved back to Louisiana, homesick for New Orleans. I started a business caring for elderly ladies with Alzheimer's disease. They lived in my house twenty-four

hours a day, seven days a week, but the work was very, very hard. Up very early in the morning, all the baths, and big breakfasts. New Orleans women want grits and eggs and the whole works. It just kept me very, very busy for ten years. I did this until they eventually died away.

Then I started thinking about going to nursing school. I made a trip to India and I saw some things in India that I liked. I would like to work in one of the hospitals there, one of the state-of-the-art modern hospitals that is free of charge to anyone that comes in. I knew that I had to get at least a GED first before I could start college, and that's what I did. I studied for three months and earned my GED. I didn't know it was easy. I thought I was going to have to study for like four years. Of course I didn't have literature and all the things that goes with a wonderful education of a high school. You know it was just your basic math, English, science, and things like that. I didn't realize I knew so much of it. I did take the test and I asked to be placed in a private area so that I wouldn't be distracted. I think that I made a 58 out of 60.

I applied for admission at Omega University, and they accepted me. I went to take the ACT test and was put in a room full of 100 people and all of these people are extremely nervous. Their pencils are tapping, their legs and feet are going, and coughing. It was just too much of a distraction to me so I didn't do very well that day. I plan on going back to the testing department. I saw some people there yesterday and told them that I wanted a private ACT test again and they said that they would arrange it, so I'm going to bring my scores up.

Education is the key to freedom for everyone. I put my children in Catholic school when they were little and they would come home from school and I had my tape recorder going defining all of the medical terminology. Education has always been important to my immediate family. My grandparents and my parents were on the road for survival so education wasn't that important to them. It was during the depression and World War II, so I still had that part

ingrained in me, but I still wanted something better for my life. I wanted a better life for my children and myself so I pretty much drummed this into their little brains growing up that they have to get an education. They all have a very good education and they are doing well in life.

Now at the beginning of my twilight years, I've started thinking about me and what do I want in life. My goal is to do something meaningful instead of sitting and watching TV for the rest of my life. I would like to go to Africa or India and give back to humanity. I want to do something important, something meaningful.

I feel like quitting college usually after a math class. I don't quit because I just don't want something to be better than me and this math isn't better than me. My future goal is to book a flight to India and stay there for a couple of months just to give myself a little reward for having done this and then I'll come back and join the peace corps and probably go to Africa or India again. I would like to help some little villages. Success for me is having completed a goal that I have been visualizing for awhile. I successfully raised my children alone; I successfully got my GED; I successfully had a couple of businesses in my life and did very well with it, without an education, I might add. Good common sense goes a long way, too. In fact, if I had to choose I'll take my common sense and intuition over anything.

Caring, a 65 year old White female, is a freshman majoring in nursing. Caring has a 2.14 cumulative GPA.

Cautious

My primary goal right now is to get employment, but until I find the right job, I'm attending school. The importance of an education was always instilled in me as I was growing up. I'm one of the believers that, the more education you have, the better off you are, in whatever you do, it doesn't matter what it is. I am up for any chance to learn something new.

I left high school primarily for medical reasons. I had a lot of medical complications and it wasn't feasible at the time for me to attend high school. My family found it easier to do home study. I thought about quitting college last semester. My financial aid got messed up and it was pretty much my own fault, but that could also be contributed to me switching schools. I would quit college if I were offered a good job. What makes me not quit right now, at this moment, is I have to feel like I'm doing something with my life. I'm not someone who can tolerate just sitting around not doing anything even if I can get away with it. It just drives me crazy. I don't want to make it sound like I'm minimizing the importance of it, but it's just something to do. I still think it's important. I'm glad to be here and I think I'm getting something out of it.

I do plan to obtain a master's degree. I think that I am successful because I'm independent and I can take care of myself in every aspect. More success for me will be when I am on my own completely.

Cautious, a 24 year old White male, is a junior majoring in computer information management. Cautious has a 3.18 cumulative GPA.

Darling

I'm very opinionated and active, at least I was active the three years that I did attend high school. I was class president for two years, on the student council, and was very, very involved. I don't have athletic ability. I enjoy reading and writing and I like to sing, although I don't think that I sing well. I have an interest in politics.

I was always taught that it was very important that I have a good education and that's something you hear all the time. Education is very important, and it seems like I've been in school my entire life. I started out in kindergarten in a private school in New Orleans, and was there for two years. Then we moved while I was in elementary school and I went to a public school. I think that as far as public schools go, I received a pretty good education, but by the

middle of my junior year, I was to the point where I just felt like school wasn't for me anymore. I had a decent GPA, but I was tired and I felt like I was wasting a lot of time. I felt like I wasn't learning what I should be learning. I got tired of doing the same repetitive stuff in English, math, and science. Just the same stuff, over and over again, year after year. I felt like I wanted to learn something new, something that I could actually use towards a career. So, that's why I ended up dropping out in the 11th grade and went for the GED.

I would never quit college. I just want to suck it up and get it over with. My mom and dad wouldn't let that happen anyway. I think about it sometimes, but I know I wouldn't do it. I would be concerned about what everybody would say if I quit college since I quit high school.

My future goals are to get married, have seven kids, and a nice big house. I considered myself a success when I got my real estate license shortly after leaving high school and when I was accepted to college.

Darling, a 19 year old White female, is a sophomore majoring in general business. Darling has a 2.99 cumulative GPA.

Great

I am good in math, dependable, I've had the same job for almost four years. I am a hard worker, with just a little bit of procrastination. My mother is a very smart individual. She graduated magna cum laude and my grandfather is a medical doctor. I have sisters who are computer engineers, and some family members have master's degrees or PhDs. From a young age, education has been very important to me. It's a big part of my life.

I earned the GED because I was home schooled and I wanted to go to college. I have thought about quitting college as I was faced with finals or mid-term exams, but I never actually just wanted to walk away. Quitting was a passing thought that I did not entertain. I keep going because I have a fear of poverty.

At this point, it is hard for me to envision success. I have a year of school left, so a successful point in my life would be graduation. Other successful points would be acceptance to medical school, a good MCAT score, and starting a family.

Great, a 22 year old White male, is a senior majoring in chemistry. Great has a 3.55 cumulative GPA.

Hellacious

I'm a very persistent individual who doesn't like to take no for an answer in all areas of my life, not just in business, but in personal or any other area. I believe there is a way to get something done if I really want to do it. I'm hard working but I like to work smart. I like to think about things before I do them. I took the Myers Briggs assessment and I was an INTJ. I'm one of those people who thinks, does and thinks, and I'm intuitive. I think I'm a little bit rigid at times too because I'm a serious person. I can be funny at times, but most of the time I'm corny if I'm trying to be funny. My sense of humor is terrible.

The role of education in my life early on when I first started from birth to about 21 years old was absolutely ridiculous. It was a nuisance. It got in the way of doing what I really wanted to do—fish, hunt, and play baseball with my friends. When I got into the real world and started to work, I realized that I didn't have as many options because I didn't go to school and get an education. My parents had always wanted me to go to school, that was a big factor in my going back just because I wanted to make them happy. Education takes you where you need to go. Education is everything and it has an infinite role. I will pass it on to my children.

I left high school because it was getting in the way of everything I loved to do. I love to do everything, but go to school, so that was one of my reasons for leaving high school. Another reason for leaving high school was that I had failed twice and that I didn't want to be behind. I was a rebellious teenager and my mom couldn't handle me. She was a single parent and my dad,

was around, but I didn't want my dad to know that I wasn't going to school, so I kept it from him. I was good at deceiving him. I was good at deceiving myself.

First off, I think it all resonated from the fact that I didn't have a strong family structure. That is my personal opinion. I didn't have anybody there communicating with me, telling me "Hellacious, you know, this is important. I think you need to go to school and you can go fishing and hunting on the weekends or you can go after you get back from school." The lack of knowledge of the fact that education is the way to success in all areas of life is another reason why I left high school.

I thought about quitting school. I was sick and I had three papers due and you know I just didn't know if I could go on being sick, having the relationship difficulty with one of my friends, and the issues with my family. What keeps me going is that if I quit school, then I will let myself down and I am not going to do that.

My future goal is to be a lawyer. In whatever I do, I'm not going to limit myself. Family wise, I want to get married, and I want to be married to one woman. I want to have as many children as I can afford. I want to be able to spend time with them, have some fun.

Hellacious, a 26 year old White male, is a junior majoring in social work. Hellacious has a 3.75 cumulative GPA.

Just

I'm a single parent and I have been for the last fifteen years. I started at Omega University when I was sixteen and dropped out to get married. I had kids, got divorced, and decided to come back in the last two years. I work full-time and I've been in the same profession for over twenty years.

Education is extremely important and has been for a long time. Mainly because both of my parents have attended college and they stressed the importance of education. When we were kids, that was something that we had to do in order to get a leg up in life.

My decision to leave high school was a mutual decision between the principal and I. I had left school again, and the principal told me the last time that if it happened again, I would either be expelled and not be able to attend the school anymore. I chose to quit. My mother was in the office with me. I was young, screaming at the principal, and cussing him out. I told him what he could do with his school. My mother was just sitting there. A minute passed between the time that I quit high school and enrolled in the GED program. The GED program wasn't a choice. It was an order by my mother. When I quit school, I was told that I had to go get my GED, take my ACT, and go to college.

I think about quitting college daily, especially when I don't understand what I'm reading or when I have to write my research papers. Those are trying times when I'm just ready to give up. I feel like it's not worth it. Next semester is going to form a lot of pressure on me because I have to apply for professional standing. I have to maintain a certain GPA in order to get it and it's just a lot of pressure.

I feel that if I quit, I'm going to be a failure. It's the same feeling that you get as if you get your first F on your test. You just feel like this isn't worth it and you should not bother, but in the long run, it ends up being okay. I don't quit because I'm doing all this for my kids, so that we can have better. We've not had good for a long time and I think it's time something positive happens in our life. It's not something negative, it's a good thing. When I see my kids happy and I'm doing well, I think that I've been very successful. In the future, if I get my degree, if I manage to get out of here and do something with it, I think that's when I will consider myself a

success. I will be content in what I have achieved. The first time I get to see my kid walk down the isle and get his diploma, I will consider myself a success.

Just, a 37 year old White female, is a sophomore majoring in social work. Just has a 2.27 cumulative GPA.

Joyful

I have been married for eight years and I have two children. I go to school full-time and I do not work right now. I am a full time mother and wife. Education didn't used to be too important to me. That's probably why I didn't finish high school and had to get a GED because I goofed off too much and didn't take it seriously. Now, it is very important to me and I'm hopeful to finish in less than two years and be a teacher. I can start over and try to make it important to other children.

I left high school in the 9th grade because I didn't want to be there. I had a boyfriend and was more worried about him and wanting to get married. School just wasn't important to me. I was actually on the fence about the decision to leave school, as much as I really didn't want to be there, I didn't want to be a drop-out. I went and visited with the principal, to see what my options were. I was thinking that maybe I could go to night school, or go someplace other than being there full-time. The principal pretty much told me that I wasn't never going to be anything anyway because I was a Smith [pseudonym for family name], and my brothers were all known for being trouble-makers. I have five brothers and the principal knew all of them well. He told me that I might as well go ahead and quit, and try to get a GED. I felt insulted and bad about myself after that, so I signed the drop-out papers the next day.

I tried almost right away to get my GED, but I didn't finish it. I gave up on that too. As a matter of fact, I tried two or three more times, but I never got it. I became discouraged because I was so bad in math. I would excel at everything else except math. I was always told by some

of the GED teachers that I would never pass the GED exam if I didn't improve on my math. I started getting more encouragement through my church and people praying for me. I started getting more courage than I ever had, so I thought that maybe I can do this. Not even a month passed, I had taken the test and passed it. Two weeks later I took my ACT and now I am here.

I have thought about quitting college at different times, but not seriously. It just crossed my mind when I had to take that developmental math class two times. Even when I barely passed it, I was just so discouraged. I have other math classes that I have to take before I graduate. I don't know if I'm ready for them.

I kind of feel resentful in a way because I don't feel like the schooling I had did enough. I'm resentful because of the principal that talked me into quitting. I probably could have stayed and learned what I needed to learn, and then went to college and probably been more successful sooner. I just feel cheated.

Prayers, family support, and church support keep me going. Courses that I am very interested in and do well in, encourage me. I think that I'm already a success, just from achieving my GED. I think that there are levels of success. I'll be successful when I get my bachelor's degree and then I'll be successful when I start that new job.

Joyful, a 27 year old White female, is a sophomore majoring in elementary education. Joyful has a 2.04 cumulative GPA.

Kind

I am happily married. I have my own business and I have one fish. Education is something that you learn. You should try to learn one new thing a day. That's educating yourself, whether it's with books, life or whatever. It means that you're always learning something and you should never think that you know everything. You always realize there's so much more out there to learn.

I left high school because there was this guy that had it in for me. For some reason or another, he spread a bunch of stuff around the school about me. I didn't even know him that well. I had one class with him the year before and it was just getting to the point where I was like on the edge. He and his friends kept harassing me, and they were spreading stuff around the school. I went to the guidance counselor. She tried to do something about it, but the principal was scared of the boy because he was so big. The guy's uncle was an attorney for the school board and he had an uncle that was a judge. So, as you probably can guess, I didn't get too much done. I was at the point of either having a nervous break down or leaving, so I left school during my 8th grade year. I started working at K& B Drugstore as a cashier. I decided that I didn't want to be a cashier for the rest of my life. So, I went back to school and got my GED. After getting my GED, I decided to enroll in college.

I thought about quitting college today because my husband is laid off right now and it's really looking like maybe I need to consider working, but my husband doesn't want me to work. The other thing that makes me discouraged is to look at how much debt I'm getting into. I'm asking myself, "how much money will I owe by the time I finish school?" I'm asking myself "is that much money worth it? Am I going to make enough money when I get out of school to pay my loans?"

I have thought about quitting college on the days when I'm just discouraged, mad, or I'm just ugh, I don't want to go back. I've had days where I come home from school and I say "I'm not going back. I could quit tomorrow and wouldn't even miss it." Then I look at my course checklist and see that I have almost one entire half of the page filled up. I have most of my management classes taken. That keeps me going, seeing how much closer I'm getting.

Success for me is knowing that God is happy with what I'm doing and that I'm serving Him. Success is when I know that I did my best in a class at the end of the semester, and I earn a good grade. Success is when my little nephew stands up, pulls himself up on me, and holds his little arms out for me. The biggest success to me is having a relationship with God. That's the most important thing to me in the world. That's what makes a successful person. No good grades or good GPA can top all that I've been blessed with.

I'm successful now. I'm going to school full-time, with a GED, which most students don't do. I have found something that I love to do; I have my own business. I have a wonderful husband. I have great friends, a wonderful family, and I have a fabulous church.

Kind, a 24 year old White female, is a sophomore majoring in business management. Kind has a 2.55 cumulative GPA.

Motivated

I'm an ex-beach hippie from the 1960s. I raised a family and decided to go school to actually qualify the supposed superior intelligence that everyone always told me I had. Because I had no education behind it, it didn't do me much good. I was just there. Once I started going to school, I decided that I want to teach junior college business administration to people who are just getting started. I am trying to move out of the homemaker world.

My husband and I are both students, so our lives pretty much revolve around education. My daughter is going back to school next semester and my step-son is in school, so the whole family revolves around education. Family time is school study time.

I left high school during the 10th grade because I was a drug-taking hippie in the 1960s. School was like a total bore. It seemed like a waste and I didn't learn anything. I don't remember anything in high school. I could see the beach from the classroom, when I lived in

California. Either you sat in this classroom and listen to these boring old dudes or go out on the beach and get high and party with all the other hippies, and wage against the war and all that stuff. School just was not happening.

Eventually, I decided that I wanted to work for the Department of Corrections in California, and they required a GED or a high school diploma, so I earned my GED and ended up working for them for awhile, but it was too depressing.

I thought about quitting college when I got a D in mathematics. I was real unhappy with that and I felt stupid and inadequate, but I got past it. I don't quit because I want to get in a classroom and help these people.

A success I lived through is having teenagers. That was a big success I thought. Educationally, I would consider myself a success everyday I make it to school. When I finally get done with my master's degree, I will see myself as a success. I always feel like a success, though. I mean I lived to be fifty years old for one thing, and a lot of people don't. I'm really happy, really healthy. I have a fantastic husband, that I didn't have the first time. I'm just so happy. My kids are all happy, everybody's happy, and I see that as a major success, to be happy in this life.

Motivated, a 50 year old White female, is a junior majoring in general management. Motivated has a 3.22 cumulative GPA.

Temerity

I am funny, rambunctious, talkative, extremely talkative, and motivated. The role of education in my life in my opinion would be very, very important because I've seen the struggles that my mother had to make as a single parent after she divorced my father and I saw how hard she had to struggle, so the role of education in my life would be to not go through what my

mother went through as a single parent. I decided to leave high school in the 11th grade because I moved from Chicago to a very small town in Louisiana, and I just wasn't motivated. I didn't feel like the teachers had a vested interest in my later career or anything like that and I just felt like I needed to get out.

I decided to get my GED after I made the decision to go ahead with my pregnancy and to be a single parent. I realized that I could not raise a child without having an education. I have thought about quitting college many times, especially when I get really tired.

I don't quit because I realize the importance of an education and I have a fear of poverty. The look in my daughter's eyes when I tell her she cannot have some chips makes me keep going. I fear that my daughter might want or need something and I can't provide it because I'm working at Taco Bell because I don't have a college education. That's what keeps me going and that is my motivation.

My future goal is to find a nice, cushy desk job with my degree. A job that inspires my creativity. I want to be creative and I don't want to be stuck in a job that I hate and just go to pay the bills. I realize that a lot of people measure success in how big their house is and how many jaguars they have, but in my opinion success is how happy your family is. How happy are you with your spouse? Can you make next month's rent? Is your kid anemic or anorexic? I mean, tending to the basic, just the basic family needs to me is success.

Temerity, a 23 year old African American female, is a sophomore majoring in communications and political science. Temerity has a 2.80 cumulative GPA.

Summary

This chapter introduced the participants who shared their lived experiences for this research project. The information used to create this introduction resulted from the compilation

of data collected from each individual during the pilot study and semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews. The findings were presented in narrative form to provide the reader with an opportunity to experience the lives of the GED recipients from their perspectives. A demographic and academic profile of the participants is displayed in Table 5. The data provided me with some insight on the lived experiences of the participants and how they define their persistence experiences in four-year institutions. The themes that emerged from the data are presented in the next chapter.

Table 5

Demographic and Academic Profile of Participants

Participant	Race	Gender	Age	School	Major	Class	GPA	ACT
Beautiful	B	F	21	AU	Architecture	So	2.50	13
Bold	B	M	24	AU	Electrical Engineering	Fr	3.81	27
Courteous	B	M	23	AU	Therapeutic Recreation	Jr	2.20	17
Determined	B	M	25	AU	Psychology	Sr	2.52	*
Gifted	B	M	30	AU	Therapeutic Recreation	Sr	3.09	18
Hilarious	B	M	23	AU	Therapeutic Recreation	So	1.73	13
Multi-Talented	B	F	36	AU	Psychology	Jr	3.29	20
Noble	B	M	29	AU	Mass Communications	Fr	2.57	14
Self-Motivated	B	F	27	AU	Secondary Science Education	Sr	2.71	19
Wise	B	M	25	AU	Fine Arts	Jr	3.03	22
Caring	W	F	65	OU	Nursing	Fr	2.14	14
Cautious	W	M	24	OU	Computer Information Management	Jr	3.18	20
Darling	W	F	19	OU	General Business	So	2.99	21
Great	W	M	22	OU	Chemistry	Sr	3.55	28
Hellacious	W	M	26	OU	Social Work	Jr	3.75	19
Just	W	F	37	OU	Social Work	So	2.27	21
Joyful	W	F	27	OU	Elementary Education	Sr	2.04	19
Kind	W	F	24	OU	Business Management	So	2.55	20
Motivated	W	F	50	OU	General Management	Jr	3.22	*
Temerity	B	F	23	OU	Communications/Political Science	So	2.80	18

Note. *Students who did not have to take the ACT or SAT for enrollment. These students transferred from community colleges.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the major findings that emerged from the participants who are persisting in four-year institutions. The findings are presented from the participants of the main research study conducted at Alpha and Omega Universities. The major findings that emerged from the focus group, semi-structured, in-depth, and photo elicitation interviews are presented as themes supported by the voices of the participants and in some instances, photographs taken by the participants. “The identification of themes provides the complexity of a story and adds depth to the insight about understanding an individual’s experiences” (Creswell, 2002, p. 531). The themes that emerged from the data are: (1) quitting is not an option, (2) I just can’t go back, (3) family influences, (4) faculty influences, (5) age, (6) math anxiety, (7) developmental education, (8) time on task, and (9) spirituality. These themes and supporting voices of the participants provided thick descriptions of the experiences of GED recipients in four-year institutions. The following pages unfold the lived experiences of the GED recipients.

Quitting is Not an Option

Many of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with their decision to quit high school. They alluded to not being one who quits. This belief was their motivation to stay in college. Most of the participants are determined to stay in college since they quit high school. I have included some of their lived experiences and photographs to promote an understanding of why the participants of this study have decided to persist in college. Bold stated, “Really and truthfully, there isn’t anything that anyone could do right now that would stop me from going to school.” Caring made a similar comment about her determination to stay in college. She stated,

“At my age, there is nothing that anybody could say or do that would turn me away from what I want to do.” Noble echoed similar thoughts:

Quitting is not an option because I've done it before and I know what will happen if I do quit, so I already know what I will go through if I do quit. I already know what is going to happen, and I'm not intending on making it happen. Plus, I've got people in my life that won't let me go down that road.

Cautious shared that quitting is not an option because he has a fear of poverty. Cautious displayed his fear of poverty through a photograph of an empty wallet (see Figure 2 for photograph). Cautious stated, “I have a fear of being broke.”



Figure 2. Empty wallet.

Temerity expressed a similar concern about her fear of poverty in relation to her daughter. She shared the following fear:

I don't quit because I realize the importance of an education and I have a fear of poverty. The look in my daughter's eyes when I tell her she cannot have some chips makes me keep going. I fear that my daughter might want or need something and I can't provide it because I'm working at Taco Bell because I don't have a college education. That's what keeps me going and that is my motivation.

Great also has a fear of poverty that he shared through a photograph (see Figure 3 for photograph). He stated that he detests his 1993 Mazda truck and the thought of driving this truck for the rest of his life keeps him going. Great made the following comment:

I detest this vehicle. The fear of driving this for the rest of my life helps me get up in the morning, study, and try to get out of school so that I can afford a nice car. This is my fear of poverty seeing me through my education.



Figure 3. Mazda truck.

Many of the participants have stated that quitting college is not an option because of a desire to be financially stable and have material possessions, such as a house and nice car. Joyful used a photograph of Wal-Mart to make her point (see Figure 4 for photograph). She stated, “This photo represents a low-paying job. It encourages me to persist because I do not want to settle for a low paying job.” Joyful also took a picture of the high price of gasoline as a motivator to persist in college for a good paying job (see Figure 5 for photograph). Joyful just purchased a new home. She said, “My new home is proof of my hard work and persistence to get what I go after.”

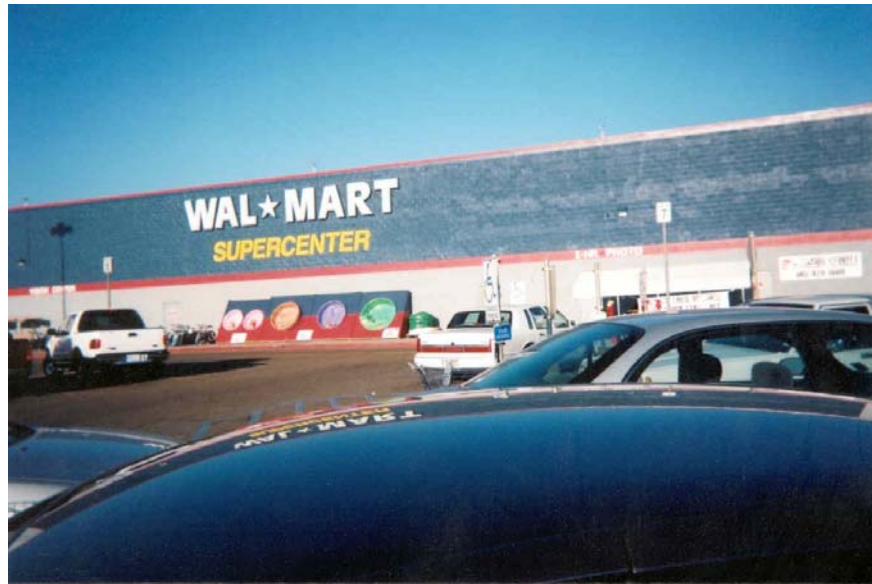


Figure 4. Low paying job.



Figure 5. High price of gasoline.

Bold portrayed similar reasons for persisting (see Figure 6 for photograph). He wants to earn a lot of money. Bold stated, “With a degree, I could come to the negotiation table when it is time to ask for a raise. I want a high paying salary.”



Figure 6. A lot of money.

Hellacious wants to earn a lot of money to travel around the world. He used a photograph of a world map and a passport to underscore his desire to persist in college and attain his goals (see Figure 7 for photograph).



Figure 7. World map and passport.

Hellacious stated, “This is a picture of a world map and a passport under it. This picture is a symbol of my goal of traveling around the world.” Hellacious wants to be a lawyer and stated

that since he will have to work 60 to 70 hours per week, he does not want to do housework or the lawn. He vowed, “I will definitely be able to afford \$1,000 a month in cleaning services. My wife, being the wife of a lawyer or the wife of any person who makes enough money to do so, deserves to have her husband at home [after work] spending time with her and the kids. I’m not going to take anything less.”

Serving as a role model was the reason cited by some of the participants as their reason for not quitting. Caring stated that she wants to be a role model for her grandchildren. She mentioned that when bad days occur, she has to be very careful when talking to her grandchildren because she does not want them to imitate her actions. Caring recalled having a bad day with math. Her granddaughter called to find out how her day went. Caring replied, “I am disgusted with math and I am going to quit.” The response by her 17 year old granddaughter was, “Yeah, me too.” Caring stated that she quickly corrected her comment and encouraged her granddaughter to stay in school.

Just has two young children and wants to be a role model for them. Just stated that she is persisting in school to show her daughters that she is doing everything to make a better life for them. She said, “Going to school and trying to achieve my education is what’s most important, to show them that it is important.” Self-motivated is also serving as a role model for her children. She shared the following statement:

The fact that I am a role model to my children and I want to do better keeps me going. Two of my children are girls and they look to me to know what to do. I do a lot of things based on how they are going to perceive what I do and how it may affect their thinking. So, what my children have learned from me, through my six years at Alpha University, is that their mom is not a quitter. So, I’m training them not to be quitters either.

Bold, an assistant manager of a store, wants to be a role model for his younger brother, who is also an assistant manager at a convenience store and not currently enrolled in college.

Bold wants to show his brother that he can work and attend school. Bold stated that he continually underscores the importance of obtaining a college degree. He stated, “I am just trying to show him that you can do both. It may be a little bit of a struggle; you might have to compromise a couple of things, but it can be done.”

Many participants cited that quitting college is not an option for various reasons. Some of the reasons mentioned for not quitting included a fear of poverty, the goal of a high paying job and material possessions, and the need to serve as a role model. These participants are determined not to quit. These reasons are impacting the GED recipients’ persistence decisions.

I Just Can’t Go Back

Some of the participants described the environment where they were reared. Their illustrations depicted a negative environment. Not going back to the bad environment was cited as their motivation for persisting in college. Some of the participants stated that going back to the old environment would negatively affect their lives. Determined explicitly made the following statement:

I just knew I didn’t want to go back to the environment that I came from. I just knew that. I wasn’t going there. I’m not going back out there on the streets or nothing, like my friends. I just refused to go back to the streets. The environment is drug infected, it has gangs and just stuff like that. You know, it’s not a good environment to live in.

Gifted shared similar concerns:

I was just so determined. I’m not going back because I knew what I was going back to. I was doing different things, you know? He [God] was transforming me, you know? All the other stuff I was thinking about or whatever, I wouldn’t think about no more. I was just a totally different person. I mean, that was good because I couldn’t look back and say oh, man you remember this? I never remember the past. It was something I not really forgot about, but I moved on. I didn’t dwell on it and say well, I did this and I’m paying. Is this gonna affect my future? I mean, it didn’t. I do not plan to go back home because it’s like my bad habits come out. Once I’m home, it’s like there are no activities. You ride and drink [alcohol]. It’s no activities, nothing for you to do. The further I am away from it, the better I think I am.

Gifted took a photograph of Johnson Hall (pseudonym) on the campus of AU. Gifted stated that the building symbolized “the end of his home environment and the beginning of his new college career.” Gifted expressed the following comment about Johnson Hall:

I have real strong feelings about this picture [Johnson Hall] because I would take a shower at this building when I did not have a place to stay. This helped me to strive harder to get a place of my own because I knew that I didn’t want to go back home.”

Gifted also took a photograph of the AU Department of Psychology bulletin board (see Figure 8 for photograph) representing what he learned in the department relative to his childhood rearing and persistence in college. Gifted voiced the following comment:

This picture is a representation of my department. My department helped me to realize that a lot of things that happened to me where directly coming from my upbringing. I was a product of my environment. As children, we don’t want to grow up in poverty and as parents, we control our children’s future. I felt very comfortable minoring in psychology because it helped me to answer some of the questions that I had been keeping from childhood.



Figure 8. Alpha University Department of Psychology.

Noble reflected on his friends as he discussed why he just can’t go back to his old environment. He made the following statement:

It's just seeing what my friends went through when they could have gotten out of what they was going through. My brother actually told me that "if you don't stay on top, you could be there where they are at [on the streets]."

Wise thought about the times of difficulty for his mother and him, and his current environment as his reasons for moving ahead and persisting in college. Wise made the following comment:

We [Wise and his mother] sat around being poor. That's it, working and being poor. Then, my father left us hanging to the point where we were living in a hotel room we couldn't afford. Eventually we got booted out and that's how I ended up back here. I know I wasn't going to sit around all day like I had been doing because that serves no purpose. Just like when I see them [neighbors] outside, you know across the street, I see them sitting in front of the store all day long. Drinking the beers, hanging out, for no apparently good reason and I just can't understand it.

Wise took a photograph of his grandmother's couch (see Figure 9 for photograph). This is the place where he slept for nine years after he and his mother were evicted from the hotel. Wise said, "The photograph of the couch makes me realize how far I've come."

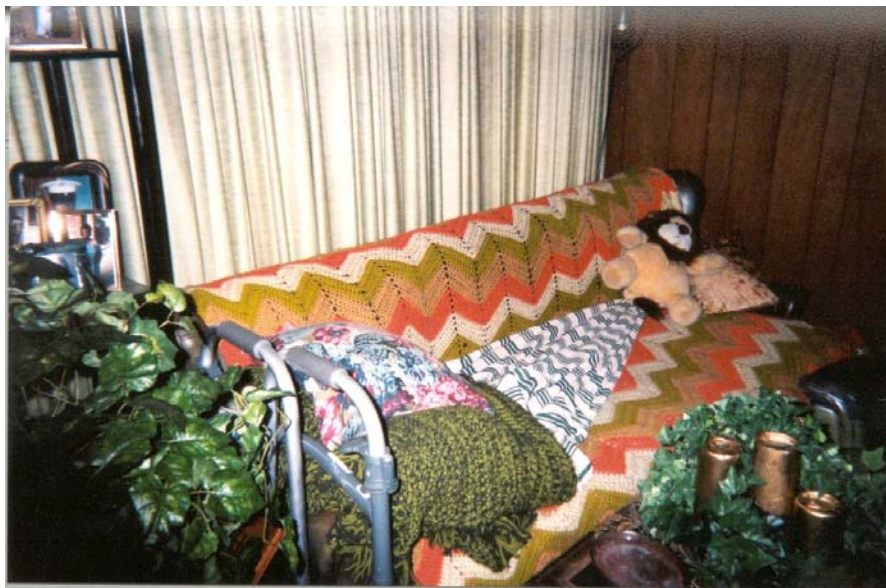


Figure 9. Grandmother's couch.

Determined expressed his feeling of not wanting to go back to his home environment using a photograph (see Figure 10 for photograph). He stated, as he sadly looked at this

photograph, “This picture lets me know that it is not easy to forget where I come from, but I just can’t go back.”



Figure 10. Housing project.

Although each participant referenced here is from a different place, the participants expressed similar reasons for not wanting to return to their home environment. The reasons included drugs, alcohol, poverty, and violence. The feeling of “I just can’t go back” was only prevalent with most of the African American males of this study.

Family Influences

Many students happily expressed the support of family, including pets, as a positive motivator when faced with the pressure and stress of college. Bold stated, “My mom was very supportive and that helped me a lot.” Just’s mother works on-campus and supports her by “putting in all the forms needed for school.” Joyful stated that her mother is her “number one fan.” Gifted shared similar feelings about the support of a sibling and other family members:

When I first started, I didn’t feel I could compete. It was like, man can I do this? I been out school for five years and she [sister] would tell me, you can do this, and to always remember you can do this. We would always hold conversations because in my mind, in my heart, she was always the smartest of the family. My brother was real intelligent, my

sister was, everybody was really intelligent in their own level, but my sister had more people skills. She interacted with people better. She was the one, always the vessel. So I always knew that I'll always get words of encouragement from her.

Hilarious reflected on the words of his father as they painted houses. Hilarious remembered the following statement made by his father, "You need to get an education to better yourself, so that you don't have to be working hard out there." Noble appreciated the support of his parents and other family members. Noble made the following comment:

I owe everything to my parents because they kept me strong. Even though there was a problem that we went through, they came together and they worked together to get me back on my feet. They didn't let me slip when I was trying to slip. Of course my brothers and sisters helped, but my parents, they helped me to get to this point and I owe it all to them. My nephew keeps me going too. He is at the age where questions are asked constantly, on a daily basis. Some of the questions are educational questions like "How do they make cartoons? Where do baby elephants live?" He lets me know how important education is when I can't answer his questions.

Joyful shared the encouragement received from her husband. She made the following statement:

Although he never finished high school, he has really supported me and made it possible for me to go to college. He goes out of his way. He tries to get babysitters if I need it, or whatever I need. He encourages me to keep going everyday."

Wise humored me with the forceful words used by his mother that encouraged him to stay in school. Wise said,

My momma said "You're getting you a degree, *&@ it." I said okay. That's fine, I was planning on it anyway, so it's alright. Momma said, "You fail, I'm gonna whip your @#&. I don't care how old you are." I try to stay arms length away from her whenever she says something like that.

Temerity's family painted horrible pictures of life without a college degree. These illustrations were, in part, her motivation for persisting in college. Temerity reflected on the following events:

They painted very, very horrible pictures of welfare mothers. They told me I was going to be in a welfare line and begging for diapers if I did not pursue my career. They made

it clear to me that I could not pursue a career unless I got a college diploma. Although they [family] were scary, they were very effective. My Aunt Ada [pseudonym] told me that “I can look forward to a life of begging, borrowing, stealing, and #*!@&^* to get whatever you want to get for you and your child.” They scared the %&*@ out of me, but they were extremely effective in scaring me.

In addition to human beings, some of the participants mentioned the importance of support from pets. Hellacious spoke of the family cat (see Figure 11 for photograph). He said, “I love this cat. She symbolizes the comfort and security I feel when I visit my parents’ house. Tiffany is a part of the haven that I go to when I need encouragement and support.” Caring echoed a similar feeling about her cat. She said, “Missy keeps me calm and she keeps my blood pressure down when I am stressed out from school. She is a nice companion.”



Figure 11. Missy the cat.

Joyful’s dog is an important part of her family (see Figure 12 for photograph). Joyful made the following comment about her pet: “Prissy goes out of her way to protect and comfort us. She makes me persist in college because I want to get a good job and take good care of her.”



Figure 12. Prissy the dog.

Other participants used symbols to describe the support received from family. Great wants to be a physician, like his late grandfather. One Christmas, he was given a pair of bookends owned by his grandfather as a reminder to not give up on his dream (see Figure 13 for photograph). Great communicated the following comment about the bookends:

When I look at the bookends, I am reminded of how hard it was for my grandfather to attend medical school. Even though I have a good deal of time left for my education, the bookends remind me that I'm not the first to attempt it [medical school]. There will be a time when I am not in school anymore. It is just a course. It is not the rest of my life.



Figure 13. Medical bookends.

Bold keeps his mother's masters degree in sight. He stated that "his mom has a higher level of education that he wants to attain." Darling communicated her experiences with family support through a photograph of the movie, "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" (see Figure 14 for photograph). Darling stated that this movie is representative of her family. She made the following comparison between the movie and her family regarding their support:

I love that movie because it reminds me of my family. My family is so obnoxious and crazy. Everybody's got their own opinions about everything and we're all going in different directions. But no matter how crazy and obnoxious my family is, they are always just trying to love me. My family is truly unique.

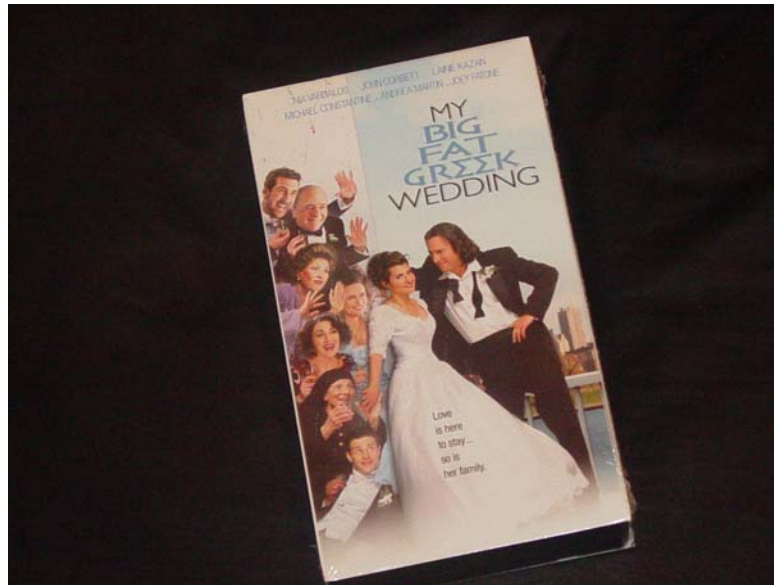


Figure 14. "My Big Fat Greek Wedding."

Some of the participants recalled negative family remarks regarding college attendance. For one of the participants, her daughters believed that she could not succeed in college. It appeared as though Caring's daughters tried to discourage her for self-centered reasons. Once Caring decided to attend college, she mentioned that her daughters said, "Don't get your hopes up. If you feel like you want to quit, we won't be mad at you. You ought to be watching this grandchild of yours instead of going to school." Hellacious also voiced negative family experiences. He reflected on his past and made the following comment:

Some of our family members are the biggest dream stealers in our lives. They tell us, based on their own experiences, that we can't do things because they're jealous, they're intimidated by us, they're intimidated by what we're getting ready to go through, or they're just mean people. It's important to refrain from letting other people say no to you because you see the external no's are what create the internal no's. If you spend a lifetime in a family that tells you that you're never going to amount to anything, you're going to tell yourself no because that's what you know.

The participants voiced their experiences with family support or encouragement and some negative family experiences. More positive experiences were shared than negative experiences. Many participants stated that they heavily depended on their families for support. It appears as though the roles of family play an integral part in the persistence of GED recipients.

Faculty Influences

Faculty support is important for students who are struggling with coursework or life events. Some of the participants verbalized how vital it was to receive the support or encouragement of faculty. Beautiful told me about one of her former teachers who keeps in touch with her via e-mail. She made the following statement:

He e-mails me every now and then. He's one of my architecture instructors. He was really encouraging and he will always tell me that whatever you decide to do, just stick with it and do your best. So he was always e-mailing me, checking up on me, and seeing how I'm doing in my classes.

Courteous compared high school teachers to college teachers. He made the following comparison:

It's a difference between college and high school. See, in high school, if you didn't get it, while the class was going on, sometimes the teacher wouldn't even mess with you because they're like we got 37 children in this class and if you ain't catching where we been, well, you need to do something about that. You need to study more and this and that. Well, on the college level, if you didn't catch it the first time while the teacher was going over it, you could go to her after class. She's got office hours you can go to. It's better. They help you a lot, during office hours or after class if you have questions about anything. They're pretty lenient about that. They'll help you out.

Determined shared similar thoughts about faculty encouragement. He made the following comment:

I have good interactions with my college teachers. So far, I have never had a so-called bad one. If I need help with anything, they all help me. It helps me to stay in school. Dr. Spencer [pseudonym] gave a lot of encouragement when I was feeling down.

Caring referred to a developmental English teacher as “the foundation of my English.” She shared how grateful she is because this teacher helped her overcome deficiencies. Caring made the following comment:

She taught us so much. For the first time in my life I was writing essays. Before this, all I could do was just write notes to people. She [teacher] was just wonderful. She helped me to learn how to revise all of my essays. She was the foundation of my English. I just made a B in my English 101 class [subsequent course]. I attribute all this to her because she really helped me.

Noble talked about the advice that his sister, who is a college graduate, gave him regarding faculty encouragement or support. Noble made the following statement:

It has been better than I thought it was going to be. When I started college, I went back home and I whined that this is not going to work out. I can't be here. I need to leave this college, but my sister actually told me if you go to the instructor's office they are going to help you. I was so scared to do that. I went to her office and she explained it [homework] to me, she actually helped me out with some homework that I couldn't get done. So after her, I went to my math and English instructors' offices, and I got the same results. I've learned that if you interact with your professors, you will see results. If you don't, you have to go back. If they see your face, if they know you want to learn, they are going to help you. I still do that today and things are happening successfully for me. So I think it is a positive thing to interact. It has been for me.

Great stated that the professors in his department are very supportive of him. The professors involve him in research and refer him as a tutor. Great shared the following experiences:

I have been offered several jobs through the school. I'm a chemistry tutor and a lot of the professors I've had in the past will send students to me. I do research with several of the professors. I have lunch with professors, talk with them, and they tell me about employment opportunities.

For some participants, buildings were representative of faculty members who supported students. For example, Gifted took a photograph of the AU library (see Figure 15 for photograph), the place where he met the most influential faculty members. He referred to these faculty members as family. Gifted shared the following comment: “Very positive is the only feeling that I have for this picture [AU library]. It [the photograph] means family values go further than just immediate or extended family. It was in this building where I met some of my most loved faculty members.”



Figure 15. Alpha University library.

Temerity shared advice that was given to her by one of her professors. Her professor told her to “keep her head out of the clouds, keep her eyes on her books, keep her legs closed, and you’ll be just fine.” Temerity stated that she appreciated her professors’ sincerity and she has adhered to his advice. Self-motivated shared mixed feelings about some of her teachers. She

stated, “Some of them [teachers] motivate me to push forward to spite them and others motivate me to push forward because they believe that I can do it.”

Several of the participants valued the support or encouragement received from faculty. However, several of the participants stated that their persistence decisions were challenged by some faculty members. Caring shared her experiences with a developmental English teacher. Caring stated that “she [teacher] spoke to us like we were all imbeciles.” During the focus group interview at OU, Joyful recounted her experience with a teacher who was negative toward her, and as a result, her grades. Joyful elaborated as follows:

I was taking health studies. I was doing very well making A’s and B’s on all my tests and completed everything, but I made a D in the class. I really felt like the teacher did not like me because she was always very negative to me. She pointed me out in class a lot. I just thought about quitting after that, and I even thought about going to approach her, but I never did. I never til this day found out exactly why she gave me a D when I deserved an A or a B, so that was horrible.

Noble experienced a similar event. He shared his negative experiences with a biology teacher with an angry expression on his face. Noble made the following comment:

My biology instructor was a very negative woman, very harsh. She actually, after failing certain tests, put down me and other students. She screamed and whatever negative things that you can think of, she did. It made me want to quit. She calls everyone up in class to handout the scantrons and calls out our grades, to the class. She gives out the ones who passed first. She calls out their name and then she’ll let them know, “you did an excellent job, 100 that’s the highest grade.” Normally, a professor would hand out the scantrons from all the graded papers and no one would know what you have. The last ones to be called are the students who failed. She will call them out and she was degrading them in front of the class, talking about their grades. One day, I was the second to the last test called. She called me up and she said, “I thought you studied. What was the problem? You were supposed to study?” That day I walked out and I said, I don’t think this is gonna work out.

One participant discussed his discontent with some faculty who do not have high levels of expectations for students. Hellacious shared an experience that he had with one of these professors.

Some of my professors don't even have the level of expectation that I have. That really makes me so angry. One professor last semester told me, "Hellacious, you need to stop giving me more than what I expect of you." That really hurt me. It really irks me when professors don't expect enough out of their students. They just don't expect enough.

Kind has a teacher who refused to answer any questions. She stated that "my teacher does not answer any of our [class] questions. He tells us that we should already know the information."

Faculty support or encouragement appeared as a reoccurring theme. In some cases, faculty support or encouragement positively impacted student persistence. In other instances, the lack of faculty support negatively impacted persistence. Overall, these experiences with faculty, whether positive or negative, have a profound impact on the persistence decisions of GED recipients in four-year institutions.

Age

Experiences about age emerged as one of the themes from the data. Some students felt ashamed of their age compared to other students on campus. Bold shared this concern. He stated, "Being the oldest person in the class is the hardest thing for me." Joyful made a similar comment. She stated that "my experience with younger people (I'm not old, but older than they are) has been intimidating because they're [younger students] all talking and forming friendships and I feel left out." Motivated described a similar feeling about her age. She stated, "Sometimes I feel like an alien because I'm so old. There's a group of thirty students and there's nobody over 22 years. It's odd. It's not good or bad, it's just odd." Caring found that "most people are condescending" because of her age.

Some of the participants had mixed attitudes about the younger, traditional age students on campus. Bold made a positive comment about younger students. He said, "In some of my classes, they [the younger students] are outgoing." Multi-talented expressed an opposite view.

She thought that most of the younger students were immature. Multi-talented stated, “The most difficult thing for me is having young students in the evening classes.” I asked her to explain her statement, and she made the following remarks:

The more mature students are in the evening classes for various reasons. The younger students started enrolling in the evening classes because they heard that they were easier, and the instructors were easier on the old people. I’ve found that they [young students] are lazy. They always want to get out early. The majority of the younger students are not really focused, and it’s a distraction for me.

Motivated made similar observations of younger students when comparing her grades to their grades. Initially, Motivated thought that she was “inadequate” and was not grasping the information like the younger students, until she learned that the younger students did not understand the information either. The younger students were “just getting by.” Motivated expounded on her observations as follows:

I’m stupid. I can’t grasp this and these kids are getting it. But then I found out they aren’t really getting it. They’re just getting D’s and getting by. I want an A. I could’ve gotten a D, no problem, but that’s not what I want. There’s a different level of maturity. They don’t understand how important it is right now. They just want to get the degree so they can make more money. Without the knowledge behind it, it’s just a piece of paper that is not going to make you more money.

Multi-talented appreciated the fact that some of her instructors acknowledged the older students. Multi-talented expounded on the following observation:

The instructors are really good about acknowledging the older students. At some point in the semester, I find almost all my instructors mention the older students and ask them about their experience and use them as an example. I think that’s good for the younger students.

Multi-talented went on to discuss one of her negative experiences with an instructor in relation to age. She made the following comment:

The negative part would be that some instructors do not like you to display your knowledge. I mean if you know too much, some of them really don’t like that, and it’s a shame. On some occasions, instructors forgetting that not all the students are young and

immature, had kind of used a derogatory tone. I've had to talk to them about it afterwards and tell them look, I'm not your average freshman student. I understand maybe that's the way you have to address the whole class, but I take it personally.

One of the participants viewed the younger students as being more healthy and having more energy. Motivated decided to take a photograph of the OU student recreational center (see Figure 16 for photograph) as a reminder to be conscientious about exercising to keep up with the younger students. She expressed a “need to be more persistent in the health arena to keep up with the younger, just out of high school students.”



Figure 16. Omega University student recreational center.

The participants of this study had different views about the impact of their age on their persistence. The data revealed that the older students often compared themselves to the younger students. For some of the older students, their age was embarrassing. For other older students, their age was a sign of maturity.

Math Anxiety

Many students mentioned math as the enemy of persistence. Some of the participants felt that they were not adequately prepared for college-level math courses. Other participants shared their frustrations with math courses. Math was mentioned many times as the reason for having thoughts of quitting college.

Determined felt that the special education classes during high school did not help to enhance his mathematical ability. He made the following statement:

I guess because I didn't learn it [math] in high school and I didn't really have enough time to learn it like I should and have that foundation like everybody else. I was always lagging behind my classmates when it came to math. Getting bad grades made me dislike it. It is probably the only subject that I had deficiencies in.

Beautiful talked about her concerns with mathematics. She stated, "I have to take the math class over. I have to really, really, really apply myself and it's hard trying to concentrate with the math." When Caring was asked if she ever thought about quitting college, she said, "Yes. It is usually after a math class." She does not understand the relevance of math. Caring further elaborated on math as follows:

Why can't I go through college without math? Why do I have to have math? I like English and I'm going to make beautiful essays. I'm going to work on this [essays] for six hours, and I'm going to have a wonderful essay because this is creative and it's an extension of me, but what is math? Math is just some stupid numbers that don't make any sense. I don't know why I have to learn this. My age group never learned Algebra. That was just an elective.

Just despises math. She said, "I hate math. That was the only class that I took every day of the week, twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. I just do not like math. I can't focus on numbers." Darling expressed her feelings about math through photography (see Figure 17 for photograph). She happily stated, "Thank goodness for a calculator because I don't think I'd get through math without it."

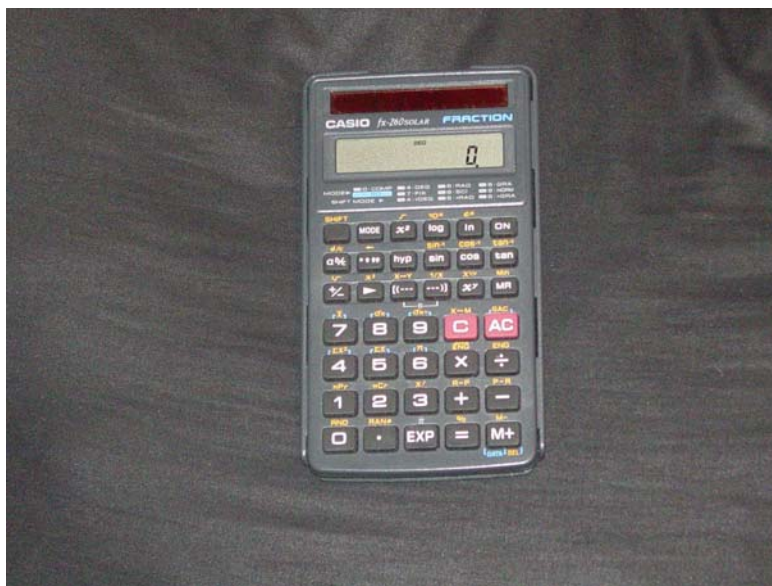


Figure 17. Calculator.

During the focus group, individual, and photo elicitation interviews, issues of mathematics emerged as a reoccurring theme. Many of the participants are stressed because of math. Some of the GED recipients believed that their lack of preparation in math during secondary school or the GED program resulted in under preparation for developmental and college level math. Moreover, this deficiency has caused some of the participants to have a fear of math.

Developmental Education

Developmental education courses were prevalent among the participants of this study. Based on an analysis of students' transcripts, the majority of students (14 out of 20) had to take at least one developmental education class, such as English or math. A frequency count determined that developmental math was taken twice as much as developmental English. Some students had to take developmental math more than once.

The sample for this study consisted of 20 participants, six White females, three white males, four African American females, and seven African American males. More White (n=8)

than African American students (n=6) took developmental education courses. However, the same number of males and females (n=7) were enrolled in these courses.

Determined talked about his experiences in developmental education courses. He made the following comment:

The developmental math gave me the foundation for algebra and from there I went into some college Algebra and eventually passed it. Taking developmental English helped me pass regular English in college. It [developmental courses] set a strong foundation.

Gifted shared a similar experience with developmental education courses. He expressed the following statement:

They [developmental education courses] really help refresh it [skills]. I had been out of high school for five years, and I missed a lot of math and English. English is my worst subject, but they [developmental education courses] helped.

Yet, Hilarious echoed the same experience with developmental educational courses. He made the following comment:

Where I was at that time, English is what I needed help in. The remedial English course helped me a lot. As far as where I was with math, the remedial course helped me out. They gave me what I needed to get better for future math classes.

One of the participants recognized that she would not be in college without the help of the developmental education courses. Caring stated, “I’m glad they have the transitional courses at this school. I wouldn’t be here right now if Omega University didn’t have it.”

Some of the students had a different view of developmental education courses. During the focus group interview at OU, several of the students expressed disenchantment with the university because of the number of developmental education courses that they had to take. Kind made the following statement:

My ACT was one point higher. I opted for 161 [math course] so I would not have to sit in another three hours of Math that is not going to count towards graduation. I think that they really need to have another math for nontraditional students that counts for college

credit or something because it is discouraging when you have to take remedial math, remedial English and traditional developmental classes. That is a whole nother semester that you are sitting here [at OU] before you can graduate.

Cautious voiced similar concerns. He made the following comment:

My major was really hard math-based and I had to have almost up to calculus before I could even start my computer science stuff [courses], and I am starting in developmental just because I had not been exposed to it. I had to take 091 and 092 [math courses]. One thing that they did not tell me that I wish they would have, I could have taken both of those in one semester and save myself one semester by getting to the rest of my courses, but nobody told me that.

Developmental education courses have provided many students with the foundation to succeed in subsequent courses. Some students felt that these courses were beneficial. Other students believed that these courses wasted time. Overall, the data showed that developmental courses impacted the persistence experiences of GED recipients in four-year institutions.

Time on Task

Informative photos were taken by the participants that helped to describe their persistence experiences in relation to time on task (studying and related tasks). Time on task emerged as an important contributor to persistence. Great used photography to compare time on task to playing his guitar (see Figure 18 for photograph). He made the following comparison:

I think that it [guitar] is tied into the more that I played, the more I got out of it. Just like education, if you just own the books (just own the guitar) and don't really put any time or effort or anything into it, you are going to get out what you put into it. If you do not put anything into it, you are not going to get any experience out. If you play or if you study, you are going to get something back.

Gifted recalled an experience of having to drop a first class during his freshman year and used photography to describe this experience (see Figure 19 for photograph). He said, "This picture shows one of the first departments where I had to drop a class. I did not study hard enough so I had to drop the class. This experience made me realize that classes will get harder, so I need to prepare harder."



Figure 18. Guitar.

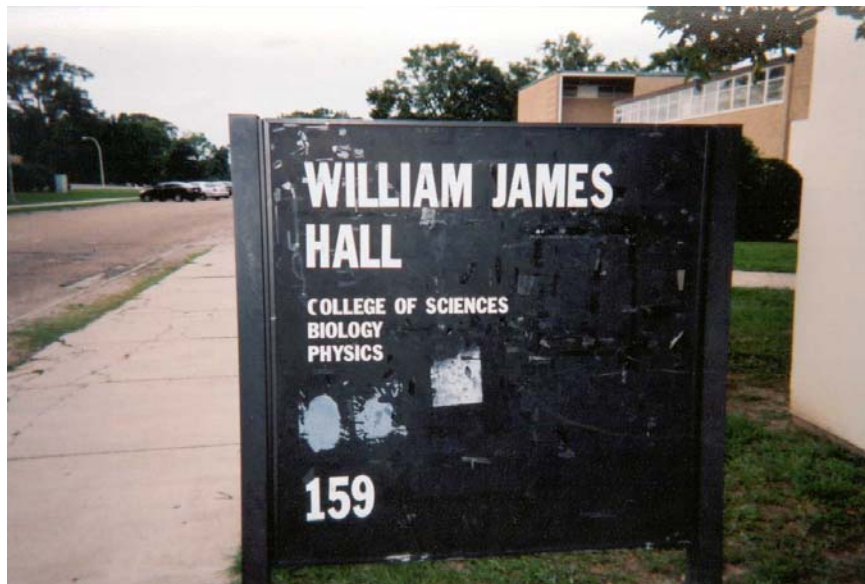


Figure 19. First dropped class.

Kind shared a story about doing accounting homework while in the dark. Kind was struggling with a “depreciation of a roller coaster” problem when the electricity went out due to a storm. After many hours, she managed to solve the problem with limited light. Kind stated that

because of the time required to complete the homework, “she became discouraged and asked herself if this is worth it?” Overall she mentioned that this demonstration of time on task and persistence boosted her self-esteem.

Laundry piled high is a helpful reminder for Joyful that she is on task (see Figure 20 for photograph). Joyful stated, “This is my utility room and all the laundry that gets piled up sometimes because I’m at school or I’m doing homework.”



Figure 20. Laundry room.

Some of the participants described experiences that hinder time for class preparation. Beautiful works about 30 hours per week. She said, “I stay at my job so long, by the time I get home from work, I am too tired to do anything.” Noble said that his DVD player impedes study time (see Figure 21 for photograph). He made the following statement:

A few weeks ago, I picked up a movie, popped it in, and I watched the whole movie, the whole day. I was behind on everything. When the semester starts, the DVD player goes in the closet. Now when I’m in this room, I’m able to just sit down and watch a show or the news, something that I can walk away from and not watch.



Figure 21. DVD player.

The participants described experiences that illustrated their time on task. Some of their experiences positively impacted their persistence. Other experiences hindered study time. Their photographs helped me to better understand how they give meaning to their persistence experiences as it relates to time on task.

Spirituality

Spirituality emerged as one of the themes during this research study. Many students mentioned the spiritual aspects of their persistence decisions. They revealed that their faith in God, prayer, and church are sources of inspiration to stay in school.

One participant discussed how a negative experience turned out to be a positive one because of prayer. Noble talked about a teacher who humiliated him after failing a test. He mentioned that he reciprocated the treatment out of anger. After praying, Noble realized that he should have remained calm. Noble explained the following occurrence:

When I failed an important test that I thought I passed, I went to her office [teacher] and I talked to her about my status in the class. She put me down and lashed out at me. I actually attacked her after that, verbally. I went back home and I prayed because I didn't

really know what I needed to do in this class. Basically, I needed to go back to her office and talk to her, being patient and calm. When I did that, good things happened.

Kind said that she prays before tests. She shared the following experience: “I have test anxiety and before a test, I pray, oh dear Lord, please get me through this. It helps me to calm down and do my best.” Joyful stated that when she gets discouraged, she always reads her favorite verses in the Bible, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (see Figure 22 for photograph). She said, “The scripture basically states that there’s a time and season for everything in everybody’s life. When I get discouraged, I’ll go back to it [Bible verse]. It reminds me that this is my time, my season to get my college degree, and it keeps me going.”

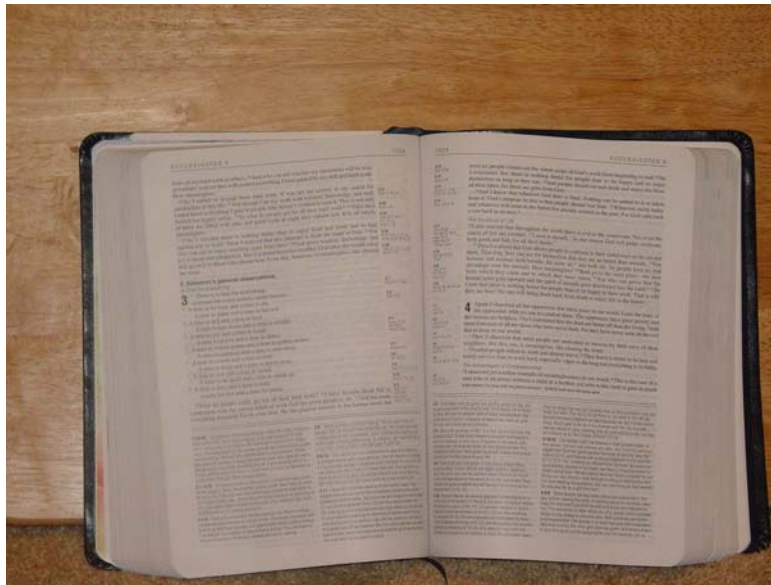


Figure 22. The Bible.

Darling said, “I have it [Bible] in my car. I carry it around wherever I go because when I have spare time, I sit down and read. It helps me to focus on my day. It’s really encouraging and uplifting just to think that He’s right there with me and I’m going to be okay. It helps me to relieve stress, just let go of things, and get through the day.” Hellacious echoed similar feelings about the Bible. He stated, “The Bible is a metaphor for my relationship with God. My

relationship with God is probably the primary reason why I'm still in school." The Bible for Beautiful is "her manual of life." Beautiful further stated the following: "God was great in letting me know who I am in Christ and all the good things I can do through Him. This encourages me when I'm at school." Caring verbalized thoughts about the pastor of her church. She made the following remark: "my pastor gives me confidence in myself and my future."

Some of the participants took photographs of churches to describe how spirituality impacts their persistence (see Figure 23 for photograph). Gifted stated that the church represents his belief that "God is able to transform any willing soul into a role model." Gifted stated, "God kept me persistent throughout my college life. I would always go to God for guidance, support, and encouragement. He never turned his back on me." Determined voiced similar experiences. He stated, "The church helps him to remember that by having a strong faith in God, I can do all things through Him. When I am down, I turn to God for help." Kind said that her husband influenced her return to church. She stated that church has helped a lot because "it takes a lot of prayer to get through it [college]."



Figure 23. The church.

The participants who shared their thoughts about spirituality only discussed this theme from a positive perspective. The participants evoked their feelings about depending on spirituality to help them succeed. Most of these participants stated that they are dependent on the spiritual aspects of their lives to persist in college, particularly on the bad days.

Defining Persistence

Much of the persistence literature is depicted by models of attrition and explained by using variables expressed quantitatively. Since this study was about the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions from the perspectives of the participants, I thought that it was very important to know how they defined their own persistence. In this study, the participants were asked to provide their own definition of persistence based on their experiences. The text below describes how the participants defined persistence.

- | | |
|------------|--|
| Beautiful: | Not giving up so easy, and just try your best to do what you have to do. |
| Bold: | I would define it as when faced with insurmountable odds or just everyday problems, you never quit. Somebody else sees a mountain, you see a mole hill. It's just going to take you a little bit longer to get over this mole hill. |
| Caring: | I would say hanging in there every day. No matter how bad you feel or how much sleep you had, just do it. |
| Cautious: | Keep going until you get what your after no matter what, even if you don't necessarily get there by the means you thought you would. You keep at it no matter what. Go after a certain goal. Even if you get knocked down, you get back up, and you will eventually get there. It may take longer than you think, it may not work out the way you thought it would, but you just get to your goal. |
| Courteous: | You're persisting at something, you're not quitting, you're not giving up, you're keeping at it, regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the obstacles, you're just not giving up. |
| Darling: | Keep on going, never give up, and never take no as an answer. |

- Determined: Keeping on, staying ahead of the teacher, being prepared for a test on days when you don't have a test, just constantly studying, and staying ahead of everything.
- Gifted: Never giving up. A lot of times people give Alpha University a bad rap, about long lines and the staff. They're always talking bad about the staff, but if you come to a person in a better manner they are going to treat you better. If one door closes for you, go around to the back. Never give up, just keep on pressing, something is going to open up.
- Great: Never ever giving up and trying your best every time. Everybody can just show up to class and make a D and then say, "I've been to school for four years." It's a lot more to be able to come out of school with something substantial, having learned something.
- Hellacious: Persistence is an undeniable, irrefutable, totally inexplicable, and aggravating to others absence of knowledge to the word no and a total urgency, a synonym for persistence, for what you really want to get done.
- Hilarious: To better myself, keep my parents happy, and to continue to play sports.
- Joyful: Devoted and if you get knocked down, then get back up. You keep trying and if something don't work for you, then try something else.
- Just: A constant roaring or want to do something, to want to finish, to want to be something, to want to go somewhere, and to move every mountain possible to get there.
- Kind: Persistence is to keep going until the end, don't let anything get in your way, and to do the best I can do.
- Motivated: Sticking with it and just continuing to push. To sit back down and study when I realize that I have to do laundry and other stuff. Sometimes I just get up and I'm doing it [chores] and I'm so in heaven, then I say, "Hello, aren't you supposed to be studying?"
- Multi-talented: Persistence is not giving up. It's setting your goal and doing whatever you have to do to reach it.
- Noble: I motivate myself and tell myself that you either want to get better or you want to get worse. That's the only place where you going to go, better or worse. I go for better. You're persisting at something, you're persisting through school, having a positive attitude, going for it. When it's coming at you and you know you not going to succeed, just smile at it. Put that smile on your face and know that you are going to just compete with it.

Self-

Motivated: Persistence is continuing to strive to go on in the face of adversity. To continue to try your best, although your best at times may not be enough. Face all difficulties and continue to have faith in what you are doing and what you believe in to keep going on.

Temerity: I define persistence in eight letters T E M E R I T Y. It also means to keep moving forward and not repeat the same mistakes.

Wise: Me getting up every day when I know I don't want to roll out my bed, getting dressed, and rolling out there every day. Like the mailman— rain, shine, sleet, or snow, I'm on my way to Alpha University.

The participants of this study shared their own definition of persistence based on their lived experiences. Although some words are common, these participants told their views about what makes them not quit college. Their thoughts were compelling and provided greater insight about their persistence experiences in college.

Choosing a Four-Year Institution

Much of the literature focuses on students who earn the GED and enroll in vocational/technical schools or community colleges (Beltzer, 1985; Fisher, 1999; Klein & Grise, 1988). The participants of this study chose to ultimately attend a four-year institution, although some did initially attend a vocational/technical school or community college. Tinto (1987) stated that college choice and the expectations upon which such decisions are made can have an insightful effect on student persistence. I thought that it was appropriate to include the reasons why the participants of this study chose to attend a four-year institution. The text below is information elicited from the participants as some of the reasons why they chose to attend a four-year institution.

Beautiful: I liked architecture in general and I heard that Alpha University had a really good program, so I wanted to go there, and plus, it was closer to home. I didn't want to go out somewhere.

- Bold:** Because I have the knowledge and I know I can excel. I'm an assistant manager at the Builders Store [pseudonym], but what if something was to happen, I have no type of safety net. I have a GED and if the Builders Store black balls me in any kind of way, then I'm stuck.
- Caring:** I'm looking for a lifestyle, something to make me happy. I could have went to a vocational school, but I just feel like I could do better than that.
- Cautious:** I planned on going to college, and I wasn't going to let the fact that I had to do the GED thing stop me. It is much more important to get some kind of college diploma and not just have the GED. I mean there's nothing wrong with just having the GED, but I wanted more than that.
- Courteous:** I wanted to play football for Alpha University. At the vo-tech everybody that goes there is pretty much from around the area.
- Darling:** I felt like a four year college that would give me more time to be young. I'm ready to get a job, but not that ready.
- Determined:** I decided that what I wanted to major in was at a four-year college. I decided to transfer without graduating from a two-year college to get comfortable and get started.
- Gifted:** Because of the death of one of my best friends who had attended Alpha University. He kind of brought me to it. Like they always say, a drunken man speaks a sober man's mind. Every time he would come out for a break, he would be preaching that. He saw a better way through education. I was working offshore at the time and I was making money. I didn't need an education, that's what I felt. But after he got killed, I started trying to finish what he started. But, through it all, it was something that I did for myself. Without the death of him, I would of never even came to school.
- Great:** I want to go to med school, so I need a bachelor's degree to apply.
- Hellacious:** I wanted to go somewhere where this is the answer; this is the real answer; this is where the meat is right here. I wanted to go somewhere where I could get some exposure to a wide array of educational opportunities. I wanted to spread my wings and broaden my horizons.
- Hilarious:** One of the reasons was to play football here. I didn't want to go to a vocational school. Going to a four-year college will give me a well-rounded education instead of just vocational, where you go straight to what you want to do.

- Joyful: I was told that what I'm going into, which is education to be a teacher, has better teaching positions and more money with a college degree.
- Just: I was forced to do it by my mom. It wasn't an option. I was told to do it. I was told what I was going to study. I was told how many classes I was going to take.
- Kind: Associates degrees really don't get you anywhere. To work, everybody wants you to have a four-year degree. A four-year degree is better [than a two-year degree].
- Motivated: I never saw the value in the two-year education with the different jobs I've had. The two-year education equals work experience pretty much. The four-year degree is more valuable.
- Multi-talented: I always wanted to go to a four-year college.
- Noble: Well, actually my first option was to go to a community college or vo-tech. But, after seeing what my brothers and sisters went through, with the success that they have taken from a four-year college, I decided to go there. Of course, my father wouldn't have it. "You're going to a four-year college." I thought about it because I had a lot of people putting in my head that a community college is better for me because I am a GED student. I believed it for a while because I thought that I couldn't handle all of those big, hard tests, and reading all these chapters. One person told me that "you have to read textbooks that are 100 and 200 and 300 pages long and they are going to test you on it, so you better go to a community college. You're not going to make it in there." My brother actually talked to her after and told her that "I was going to Alpha University, or wherever I want to go and I will graduate."
- Self-Motivated: At that time a lot of my friends and family members were starting school. I knew that I was smarter than them, so I said that I might as well go back to school too.
- Temerity: I visualized a life for myself and my child, similar to a life that my mother worked very, very hard to provide for myself and my siblings after she obtained her own university degree. I really felt like a university would best suit our needs later on in life.
- Wise: Because I wanted a real degree.

The participants of this study explained why they chose to ultimately attend a four-year university. Although some of the responses are practical, the reasons do provide pertinent information relative to their persistence. GED recipients are no longer limited to a vocational/technical school or community college. This information may be beneficial for higher education officials. The four-year institution was chosen by the participants as a viable means for obtaining a valued credential.

Other Findings

While not major themes of this study, some photographs could help us become more aware of the persistence experiences of GED recipients in four-year institutions. The participants took photographs that positively and negatively impacted their persistence. The positive photographs are presented in the next section. Thereafter, negative photographs that impacted the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions are presented.

Positive Impact on Persistence

Hellacious stated that induction into an honor society positively impacted his persistence. Hellacious said, “This plaque symbolizes my academic success and the fruit of my labor. Why quit now? I look good on paper” (see Figure 24 for photograph).

Joyful shared that she spent most of her day watching television before she started college. Joyful said, “This is a bad reminder of what I spent a lot of my time doing before college. This photo encourages me because it reminds me of what I would be doing if I did not go to school everyday” (see Figure 25 for photograph).

Multi-talented gave her views of the AU financial aid office relative to persisting at AU. Multi-talented stated, “Financial aid plays an important role in my academic progress because it

keeps me on tabs with regard to the number of hours I attempt each semester and it also helps to keep me on tabs with my GPA” (see Figure 26 for photograph).



Figure 24. Award.



Figure 25. Television.



Figure 26. Alpha University financial aid office.

Cautious took a photograph of a good grade that he earned on a business law test. Cautious declared, “This was the type of test nobody scored perfect on. The highest grade was a 90 and I got an 88. Doing well in your classes is a good feeling and makes you want to see it to the end.”

Negative Impact on Persistence

Cautious shared some of his concerns about commuting over an hour to school each day. Cautious said, “One of the things that I get tired of doing all the time is commuting. It can get old, wear and tear your vehicle, and cost a lot [gas]” (see Figure 27 for photograph).

Darling told me about the time when she was involved in an automobile accident while commuting to school. Darling shared the following experience: “On the way to calculus class, I was in a car accident. I was coming off the interstate, late for class, and some old man in a big old Ford truck nailed me from the back. For two days, I was in the bed with whiplash. I was miserable” (see Figure 28 for photograph).



Figure 27. Empty highway.



Figure 28. Wrecked car.

Multi-talented shared her discontent with the hours of the AU bookstore. She said, “The hours of the campus bookstore aren’t conducive to my work schedule. When I had Saturday classes, this book store was closed. If there was a game, and the game has nothing to do with classes or the need for books, it was closed too” (see Figure 29 for photograph).



Figure 29. Closed bookstore.

Cautious described his dissatisfaction with parking on campus. Cautious said, “One of those little aggravating things that every student has to deal with, not just students in my situation. When you put a lot of the little things together, it’s just constant irritations all around. It can be a deterrent for you going to school” (see Figure 30 for photograph).



Figure 30. Full parking lot.

Self-motivated was angry about the road construction at AU. Self-motivated expressed the following feelings: “There is ongoing construction at AU that is never done. It always has bad timing on the construction. The time frame is much too long and it’s aggravating. They do it in the wrong areas, at the wrong time. The construction should have been done throughout the spring and the summer when there are less people” (see Figure 31 for photograph).



Figure 31. Road construction.

Many experiences affect the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions. The positive experiences encouraged them to persist in college. Although the negative experiences made them want to quit, the GED recipients expressed a determination to succeed in college.

Summary

Presented in this chapter are the findings from this study that examined the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions. The data for this study were gathered from focus group interviews, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, photography, photo-elicitation interviews, and document analysis of students’ records. The themes that emerged from the data

supported by the lived experiences of the GED recipients provided a greater awareness of the persistence experiences for this group of students. The next chapter provides a discussion of the findings in light of the research questions, recommendations, and conclusions.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the persistence experiences of students with a GED in four-year institutions. The need for this study was evident due, in part, to the lack of qualitative literature about the topic. The sample consisted of 20 participants— six White females, four African American females, three white males, and seven African American males.

Qualitative research methods were used to conduct this study. The theoretical perspective was based on my understandings of symbolic interactionism. The research method and theoretical perspective allowed me to gain a better understanding of how GED recipients in four-year institutions defined meanings and shape their own realities regarding their persistence decisions. Although the participants of this study shared diverse lived experiences about their persistence in a four-year institution, many of the same reasons for persisting emerged from the data. These themes provided information to address the research questions of this study.

The main research question that guided this study was:

What experiences affect the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions?

The research sub-questions were:

1. How does academic integration affect the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions?
2. How does social integration affect the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions?
3. How does time on task affect the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions?

4. How does developmental education affect the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions?

This chapter begins with a discussion of the research questions in light of the findings. Next, a discussion of the themes that emerged from the data is presented. Thereafter, recommendations for colleges and universities, followed by some of the difficulties that I experienced while conducting this research study, and suggestions for future research are discussed. This chapter concludes with words of wisdom by the participants of this research study.

Discussion of Results

The research questions were addressed through data collected from focus group interviews, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, photography, photo elicitation interviews, and document analysis of students' records. The data revealed that many profound experiences influenced the persistence decisions of GED recipients enrolled in four-year institutions. A discussion of the research questions with regard to the findings is presented below.

Sub-question #1

How does academic integration affect the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions?

Academic integration is a conceptual category which describes how students integrate into the academic system of the college. An individual's integration can be measured in terms of academic performance and faculty and staff interactions (Tinto, 1987). These components of academic integration had an impact on the persistence of the participants for this study.

Academic Performance

Grades are an important component of academic performance. Grade performance relates to meeting certain explicit standards of the academic system. Grades represent an

extrinsic form of reward due to an individual's participation in college. As further pointed out by Spady (1970), grades tend to be the most visible form of reward in the academic system of a college. Many studies have shown that grades are an important determinant of persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Osei, 2001; Rose, 1999; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, Tinto, 1987). This research study was consistent with the findings of previous research.

The participants of this study placed great emphasis on earning good grades. This extrinsic reward of college was a major determinant of persistence. Some of the students shared that when good grades were earned, they had a boost in self-esteem and they were encouraged to continue. However, earning bad grades lowered their self-image and made them have thoughts of quitting college. The attrition literature suggests that higher grades can be associated with persistence, and conversely, lower grades can be associated with student attrition (Kothenbeutel, 1993; Metzner & Bean, 1987).

Tests of academic ability, such as the ACT, are required for enrollment into most postsecondary institutions. The studies of Dulniak, Mattox, Naylor & Stanford (as cited in Bean & Metzner, 1985), and Rose (1999) have shown that students' persistence is positively related to their scores on tests of academic ability. The average composite score for students who took the ACT test in Louisiana during 2003 was 19.6 (American College Test, 2004). For this study, the ACT composite scores ranged from 13 to 28, with varying cumulative GPAs (range of 1.73 to 3.81). The participants who earned at least average ACT scores (20) have good cumulative GPAs. Likewise, some of the participants who earned lower ACT scores have relatively good cumulative GPAs. Beautiful scored a 13 on the ACT, but had a 2.5 cumulative GPA. Temerity's ACT score was 18, but her cumulative GPA was 2.80. Gifted scored an 18 on the ACT and earned his bachelor's degree with a 3.09 cumulative GPA. Hellacious earned a 19 on

the ACT and had a 3.75 cumulative GPA. Based on the participants' ACT scores relative to their cumulative GPAs, the ACT test was not a good indicator of persistence for the participants of this study who have relatively low ACT scores.

Faculty Interactions

A component of academic integration is interactions with faculty. Many research studies found that interaction with faculty is related to persistence in college (Beltzer, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975). Astin (1984) found that frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement. Given the direct association of faculty with the academic system of the college, student contact with faculty is a critical component of student persistence (Astin, 1984).

The data related to faculty interactions yielded varying results. Some of the teachers provided encouragement and served as role models. Other teachers openly ridiculed students. However, most of the participants of this study often desired quality interactions with faculty members. Students who had problems with difficult classes often mentioned obtaining assistance from their teachers as a positive impact on their persistence.

Although most of the participants gave good reports of interactions with faculty, several participants told of interactions that had a temporary negative impact on their persistence. Some of the negative interactions included making disrespectful remarks and overlooking the student. However, the negative interactions did not have a long-term affect on their overall persistence in college.

Staff Interactions

Tinto (1987) discussed interactions with faculty and staff as a single entity. Tinto (1975) stated that wide-ranging contact with faculty and staff enhances the likelihood of persistence.

While the participants of this study provided thick descriptions of their interactions with faculty, their discussions of staff interactions were very limited. The comments provided by the participants were mainly positive and limited to responses such as “everyone has been very nice and helpful.”

During the semi-structured, in-depth interviews, the participants of this study were asked to discuss their interactions with staff. Some of the participants responded by providing experiences with faculty. One of the participants responded, “It’s been fine. I’ve always been the type that gets along with teachers.” Another student stated, “Staff members, meaning faculty?” These students may not have been aware of the distinctions between faculty and staff. This misconception speaks to inadequate orientation to the college environment.

Colleges and universities should provide students with an overview of the organization and structure of their institution during orientation. Tinto (1987) referred to orientation as the “beginnings of integration” (p. 146). More importantly, Tinto (1987) stated that often orientation programs fail to provide students with information about the individuals who provide advising, counseling services, and the information that new students require. Thus, personal contacts with these individuals are hindered. The data of this study showed significantly higher levels of faculty interactions than staff interactions. Inadequate orientation may have contributed to the lack of voiced experiences with college staff.

Within the academic system of the college, it appears that academic grade performance and faculty interactions have a profound impact on the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions. Interactions with staff remain unclear. The participants of this study have maintained the required GPA for college enrollment. Although the participants had varying experiences with faculty, their overall decision to persist in college was not affected.

Sub-question #2

How does social integration affect the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions?

Social integration is the incorporation of an individual into the social system of an institution (Tinto, 1987). According to Tinto (1987), social integration occurs through informal peer group interactions and extracurricular activities. Persistence decisions may be affected by an individuals' integration into the social system of the college. Successful encounters in this area may result in friendship support, social communication, and collective affiliations (Tinto, 1975).

Bean and Metzner (1985) concluded that social integration was not positively and significantly related to the persistence of nontraditional students. Although in some cases GED recipients are considered to be nontraditional students, the Bean and Metzner (1985) study defined the nontraditional student by age, enrollment status, and housing status. Students with a GED were not included in their definition.

Nonetheless, the finding of this current study supported the findings of Bean and Metzner (1985) and other researchers (Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson, 1983, as cited in Bean & Metzner, 1985; Staman, 1980, as cited in Bean & Metzner, 1985). Many of the participants of this study have limited social integration at their college. Some of the participants have external social involvement, such as spending time with family or participation in community activities.

Of the participants who did mention involvement in social activities, the younger students were more socially integrated than the older students. One of the older participants stated that she "didn't care about the social life" because she was in college for herself. The social interactions of the younger students were limited to membership in department clubs. One participant was a member of an honor society and one participant was involved in athletics.

Many of the younger students expressed a desire to establish friendships on campus, preferably with other GED recipients. One of the participants stated that “not knowing anybody” was the reason why he was not socially involved. A female participant echoed a similar concern. She feels like her college experience was hindered because she did not have friends on campus and she was not socially involved in the academic setting of the college.

Many of the participants expressed the need for a nontraditional student organization and mentoring program. Such programs could help students to become socially involved and increase the likelihood of students meeting others similar to them. These programs could also serve to provide sources of support or encouragement for nontraditional students.

While becoming a part of the social system of the institution was mentioned by some, the participants of this study were mainly concerned with the academic system of the institution. Through photography, one of the participants described the campus student union as “a place to mingle, build friendships, and socialize.” He further stated that he “stays away from this place because he wants to be alone, change, and focus on school.”

A number of reasons accounted for the limited social integration of the participants. Such reasons included lack of time, inability to meet friends, lack of interest, or commuting daily. This research informs us about the limited social integration for the participants of this study. Additional research would help us to better understand why these students have limited social integration in college.

Sub-question #3

How does time on task affect the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions?

Time on task is defined as the time that an individual devotes to a particular task (Bagayoko & Kelley, 1994). For this research, the time on task was defined as time spent

studying (reading, writing, and other activities related to an academic program). The most commonly prescribed amount of time for studying to do well in college is at least two hours of studying for every hour of class time. This amount equates to 25 to 30 hours per week for full-time students (Young, 2002). This time was recommended by more than 14,000 faculty members at 143 four-year colleges and universities who participated in the 2003 National Survey of Student Engagement.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (2003) found that the majority of students (63%) spent 15 or fewer hours studying. Only about 13% of full-time students spent more than 25 hours per week preparing for class (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2003). The findings of this research study are consistent with the Student Engagement study. On average, the participants stated that they spend 1 to 2 hours per day studying, which equates to 7 to 14 hours per week, if they study on the weekend. The types of studying mentioned included “reading through notes, reading the book, and making an outline.”

Like many traditional students, the time that the participants of this study spent on studying is far less than the recommended amount of time. However, time on task was a critical part of their persistence experiences. Some of the students acknowledged not spending enough time studying which was reflected by a poor grade. Other participants spent much of their time on task and delayed other responsibilities. Overall, many of the experiences of the GED recipients positively impacted their time devoted to studying.

Sub-question #4

How does developmental education affect the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions?

Developmental education is a process to prepare students for later success in college (Boylan and Bonham, 1992). Academic support programs, such as developmental education courses, promote student success. Developmental instruction gives students the same chance of college success as well-prepared students (Kulik et al., 1983). It is designed to provide students with the skills and knowledge they did not receive prior to enrolling in college. Many of the participants of this study did not have exposure to courses taught in high school for college bound students.

Many participants (14 out of 20) had to take at least one developmental education course, such as English or math. More White (n=8) than African American students (n=6) took these courses. However, the same number of males and females (n=7) were enrolled in the developmental education courses.

Mixed feelings were expressed about these courses. Some of the students thought that the developmental education courses refreshed skills, provided a sound foundation for subsequent courses, and filled “academic gaps or deficiencies” between leaving high school and college. Other students were disenchanted with the institution because of the number of remedial courses they had to complete. Overall, the results of this research study showed that developmental education has a positive impact on the persistence experiences of GED recipients in four-year institutions.

Main Research Question

What experiences affect the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions?

Many diverse experiences impact the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions. Some are positive experiences and others are negative ones. The positive experiences encourage the participants to remain in college. On the contrary, the negative

experiences make them want to quit college. However, their overall persistence experiences were not impacted by the negative experiences. The information obtained in response to the research sub-questions provided insightful information about the persistence experiences of GED recipients in four-year institutions. The next sections contain a discussion about the other themes that emerged from the data as experiences that impacted the persistence of the GED recipients in four-year institutions.

Deep Determination (“Quitting is Not an Option”)

Determination had a positive impact on the persistence of GED recipients. Many of the participants of this study stated that “quitting is not an option.” These students were determined to obtain a bachelor’s degree.

An assumption that some people make is that all students are in college for economic gains. Although many of the participants of this study expressed a desire for economic gain, some of the participants referenced intrinsic motivators, such as self-motivation, diligence, and self-discipline, as reasons for persisting. The participants who expressed a desire for economic gain cited the need to be financially stable, take care of family members, and gain material possessions, such as automobiles and houses. Overall, determination was a strong contributor to the persistence of the participants in pursuing a bachelor’s degree. These students were determined not to quit college.

Horrific Home-town Environment (“I Just Can’t Go Back”)

The theme, “I just can’t go back,” was expressed by most of the African American males. Although I could not find literature to support or refute this theme, I can personally identify with these participants. I was born and raised in “The Projects.” We were the first family who moved into a new housing facility. For my family and me, this place was a two-story dream home in a

good environment. At a young age, we moved to another town. Eventually, “The Projects” became infested with drugs, alcohol, violence, and poverty. This area of town is still a very bad environment. For me, going back would mean losing almost everything that I have worked so hard to attain.

The phrase, “I just can’t go back” takes on an added meaning. People change because of certain encounters or experiences. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) discuss personality development courses in discussions of the moral education literature. Personality development courses have the objective of “promoting reflection about the self and the self in relation to others” (p. 357). I believe that college, in general, provides an overall awareness of self.

Overtime, the African American males who are experiencing the feelings of not wanting to go back to their home environment have changed. Gifted stated that “college transformed him into a self-conscious person.” This change may have been the result of participation in higher education. This phenomenon remains unanswered which opens the door for more research.

Faithful Family and Friends (Family Influences)

Family and friends have a great influence on students’ persistence in college. Many of the participants stated that one of their reasons for persisting in college was for their families. They wanted to make their families proud of them. Some of the students have close friends or family members who are also in college and they draw support from each other. Motivated stated that her husband, son, and daughter are in college and their discussions over dinner focus around school. Kind mentioned that her husband is in school also and they always encourage each other to persist. Many of the participants recalled phrases of encouragement or support spoken by family members. Some of the phrases included the following: “You can do it; my prayer for you is to stay focused; and winners don’t quit.”

Other participants recalled negative family influences regarding their persistence. One participant labeled some of his family members as “dream stealers.” Another participant had family members who were not supportive of her college enrollment due to the time that college took away from family time. Overall, the data of this study showed that family influences were positive experiences that impacted the persistence decisions of the GED recipients.

Anticipatory Age

Older students seemed more idealistic than younger students. The older participants wanted to change the world. A 65 year old participant expressed a desire “to go to India or Africa and work in the hospitals to give back to humanity and do something meaningful.” Another participant, who is 50 years old, wants to become an elementary teacher to help children. Yet, a 42 year old participant from the pilot study wants to become an attorney “to make a difference for our state, lobby for changes, balance the scales, and help the uninformed.” As the results of this study showed, the older students appeared to be persisting in school for more idealistic than financial reasons. The younger students expressed more financial reasons for persisting in college, such as obtaining a good paying job and purchasing a home or car.

Mad Math (Math Anxiety)

Math anxiety emerged as a theme impacting the persistence of GED recipients. Many of the research participants were plagued with math anxiety. Research conducted by Betz (1978) showed that less advanced mathematical training combined with an absence from formal learning produces levels of anxiety and lack of confidence. The results of this study were consistent with the research of Betz (1978). Some of the participants acknowledged that their abilities to do math was hindered because they did not complete high school. Perhaps these students are suffering from a low self-concept of their abilities or fear of personal failure.

Cemen (1987) stated that math-anxious people are often quick to tell themselves that they are unable to do math and by avoidance end their discomfort. However, students can only avoid math for a limited time. All students are required to take some level of math to earn a bachelor's degree. One of the participants of this study who recently earned a bachelor's degree avoided math as much as possible. After taking the same math course two times, he settled for a lower passing grade (D). Some of the students sought help from tutors, but still had much difficulty understanding math. One of the participants of OU stated that the tutoring program was too much like a classroom setting because the room was always full. Perhaps this college could offer one-on-one tutoring to better meet the needs of its nontraditional students.

Some students stated that the adult education centers only prepared them to take the GED test. Perhaps GED testing centers should take into consideration that some students do enroll in college after earning the GED. A need exists to examine the impact of the adult education curriculum on students' educational goals. It may be helpful to have specific programs for college-bound students.

This research study showed that math anxiety impacts the persistence of some GED recipients. This study shed some light on the topic; however, there is more to learn. More research is needed that focuses on GED recipients and math anxiety and effective intervention strategies that show students how to cope with math anxiety and be successful at math.

Special Spirituality

The participants of this study often mentioned spirituality as a reason for persisting in college. The vast majority of the literature shows that African Americans tend to report higher levels of spirituality and religious participation than Whites (Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, & Lewis, 2002; Taylor, Chatters, Jayakody, & Levin, 1996; Walker & Dixon, 2002). The findings

of this study were not consistent with this literature. White and African American students expressed their dependence on spiritual activities, such as prayer, reading the Bible, and exercising faith. In fact, more White students (n=5) mentioned spirituality than Black students (n=4). Some of the participants mentioned that on difficult days, they found comfort through prayer. Spirituality evolved as a positive impact on the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions.

Summary

The findings discussed in this chapter provided a greater awareness of the persistence experiences of the participants relative to their academic and social integration, time on task, and developmental education. Against insurmountable odds, the participants of this study were persisting in four-year institutions. Berkner et al. (1996) identified receipt of a nontraditional high school diploma, such as the GED, as a risk factor that was detrimental to postsecondary persistence. The GED recipients of this study were challenging some of the literature as they continued to persist in four-year institutions. The participants of this study were determined to obtain a bachelor's degree.

Recommendations for Higher Education

This research study was conducted, in part, to contribute to the literature needed to inform educators and policy-makers about the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions. Hopefully, this study will assist with improving policies and practices involving this segment of the student population. Several important recommendations have evolved from this research study. The next sections provide recommendations for colleges and universities in general, followed by specific recommendations for the data collection sites of this study, Alpha University and Omega University.

Colleges and Universities

Redefining the Age of the Nontraditional Student

OU defined nontraditional students as “all students over the age of 25 years” (Omega University website, 2002). This definition is consistent with much of the literature. I could not find the definition of a nontraditional student by AU.

In Fall 2002, over half of the number of GED recipients enrolled at OU was 17 to 24 years (OU Office of Institution Research and Assessment, 2002). Almost half of the number of GED recipients enrolled at AU was 17 to 24 years (AU Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research, 2002). Many GED recipients enroll at postsecondary institutions between the ages of 17 to 24 years. Almost one of every three GED credentials awarded in the United States (31.8%) was earned by individuals 18 years or younger. In Louisiana, the average age of students who earned the GED diploma was 22.4 years (American Council on Education, 2000).

If universities define the nontraditional student by over 25 years, where do GED recipients in their student population who are 25 years and younger fit in? It appears that this age group of students has been excluded. More attention should be given to the definition of the age of nontraditional students to ensure that its meaning is inclusive of the targeted student population.

Some of the services for nontraditional students have an age requirement. For example, OU had a nontraditional student office that provided counseling and other services for nontraditional students. Some of the participants of this study stated that they sought the services of the nontraditional student office at OU; however, they were refused services because of their age. If the age of the nontraditional student were redefined, then more GED recipients could receive services. Hopefully, this research study will provide an awareness of this issue and assist

policy-makers at the federal and local government levels to redefine the age of the nontraditional student.

Implementing Informed Policies Especially for GED Recipients

The results of this study showed that GED recipients have many diverse experiences that impact their persistence in four-year institutions. One of the primary experiences is the alternative route taken by these students to earn a high school diploma. Colleges and universities should consider the experiences of these students when writing and implementing policies.

One of the data collection sites of the study had a specific admissions policy for GED recipients. The policy stated, “Students who have successfully completed the General Education Development (GED) program must have an ACT composite score of 19 or higher (SAT of 900 or higher), meet the unit requirements, and submit a transcript with satisfactory grades. The records of these students will be evaluated carefully by the Admissions Committee. Consideration may be given to the elective courses specified above as well as the applicants’ entire academic background.” Regarding this policy in reference to GED recipients, some students leave high school as early as the ninth grade. These students would not have met the credit unit requirements for admission into a four-year institution and may not have a high school transcript. Moreover, adult learning centers do not award grades or transcripts. The state agencies provide the GED recipients with the scores on the GED test and a GED diploma once the student passes the exam.

The aforementioned institutional policy showed that it was written by individuals in an “ivory tower” who are not aware of the experiences of GED recipients. Policies should be implemented that take into consideration the alternative route to the high school diploma by

GED recipients. This research may serve as the impetus for higher education officials to look more closely at their GED recipient population and consider their multiple experiences.

Nontraditional Student Organizations

Many of the participants articulated the need for a nontraditional student organization on campus. This organization could give students an opportunity to establish peer mentoring relationships and network with others similar to them. This organization could also serve as a source of support for the students and possibly provide one-on-one tutoring in difficult subjects.

Such an organization does exist at the national level. The Association for Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education is an advocacy organization that was created in 1996 to improve the services for non-traditional students. This organization has an annual nationwide celebration of nontraditional students in higher education. The “National Nontraditional Student Week” is celebrated the first full week of November to recognize non-traditional students on campus (Association for Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education, 2003).

Alpha University

Many higher education institutions have structured programs or services specifically for nontraditional students (College is Possible, n.d.). I could not find any information in the AU catalog about these services or programs (Alpha University Catalog, 2000). However, AU has recently established an Office of Retention that has the primary purpose of increasing the retention and graduation rates of all students (AU Office of the Chancellor, 2002). This research study was conducted at a very critical point in relation to the establishment of the AU Office of Retention. This study will be shared with this office in hopes that it may serve as a source of information and encouragement for the AU Office of Retention to implement services especially for its GED recipients.

Omega University

The College of Basic Studies houses the Office of Judicial Affairs. This office was formerly called the Office of Adult, Commuter, and Veteran Services, and later evolved into the Office of Adult, Commuter, Veteran Services, and Judicial Services before assuming its current name.

In a recent phone conversation with the Office of Judicial Affairs, one of the staff members stated that the office mainly focuses on judicial affairs and some services for veterans. The office provided emergency locator services and counseling for nontraditional students, but these services have been discontinued. The Office of Judicial Affairs also coordinated the Nontraditional Student Organization, but this organization is currently inactive. The OU General Catalogue 2002-2003 still lists the Office of Adult, Commuter, and Veteran Services and the Nontraditional Student Organization as services for nontraditional students. The Office of Judicial Affairs staff member stated that these services are to be assumed by a different office; however, that office has not been declared.

OU has as a strategic priority “to recruit, advance, and graduate qualified students in a timely manner” (Omega University General Catalogue, 2002-2003). If this strategic mission is to be accomplished, the institution must be concerned about the matriculation of its GED recipients as well as its traditional high school diploma recipients. Hopefully, this study will provide the administrators of OU with information that could assist with implementing and continuing services to retain this group of students.

Researcher Difficulties

I experienced some difficulties while conducting this research study. First, I had difficulty obtaining information from AU and OU about their GED recipients. The Institutional

Research Offices could not provide me with a list of GED recipients due to privacy issues; thus I could not make direct contact with the students. I had to place ads in the campus newspapers and post flyers on campus. These constraints impeded the process for selecting participants. After weeks of not getting any responses from GED recipients, the OU Director of Institutional Research sent an e-mail to all GED recipients enrolled informing them of my study and requesting that they contact me if interested. Without these restraints, I could have gained the support of more participants by speaking with them directly and explaining the details of my research study. Although these difficulties were experienced at each institution, “quitting was not an option.”

Lesson Learned

A lesson learned is relative to the role play component of the focus group interviews. Although the focus group interviews provided insightful information relative to the topic of this study, I was somewhat disappointed with the results of the role play component. The participants of the focus group were requested to assume the role of other GED recipients by placing themselves in the shoes of other GED recipients. The students were told that they were on a mission to find out the persistence experiences of other students with a GED in four-year institutions. The participants did not totally assume the role of other GED recipients. I should have been more creative. I could have read a short excerpt to set the stage for the discussion. Also, I could have included Sherlock Holmes props such as detective hats and magnifying glasses to help the participants better identify with the role.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study suggests several areas for further research about the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions. First, research studies are needed about redefining the age

of the nontraditional student that could have a profound impact on policy-makers at the federal and state levels. With documented research, officials may be inclined to implement or enhance policies regarding these students.

Second, research is needed to explore the details of why African American males are so disenchanted with their home-town environment. Intervention strategies could be recommended to aid the community in making the environment a better place so that if college graduates want to return home, they can do so without regret. Much light is needed on this phenomenon.

Next, many GED recipients are persisting in four-year institutions; however, some are not. A research study about students who do not persist in four-year institutions is needed. Such a study could assist higher education officials with learning why these students left the institution. As a result, their retention policies for this segment of their student population could be enhanced.

Finally, a longitudinal study across four-year institutions is needed to look at the persistence of GED recipients. Specific attention should be given to race, gender, and age. Such a study may provide information about GED recipients in various settings. A larger sample size would assist in generalizing results to a larger group of students.

Concluding Remarks

The participants were very receptive to this research study. Some of the participants expressed their appreciation for participating in this study and mentioned how the study benefited their lives. Kind sent me an e-mail message several months after our interviews were conducted. Kind made the following comment:

I'm still struggling with school although it is becoming easier. If I am having a problem with the material, I go to the professor for help. I've told three of my professors that I have a GED and did not cover this in high school. They are very understanding and have offered to help me anyway they can. My biology professor has offered to tutor me. Right

now I have a D in that class. The rest I have A's and B's. Ever since I participated in your study, I no longer hesitate to ask for help and to explain my background. I have found it really helps the professor to know my background.

Another participant stated that her children did not know that she earned a GED. Multi-talented mentioned that due to her participation in this research study and other events, she felt compelled to tell her children about the alternative route that she took to earn a high school diploma. She wanted to let them know that although the GED does have negative stereotypes, it is a valid alternative for completing secondary education and they can be successful with a GED. She decided to tell her children about her past experiences the Sunday following our initial interview. Multi-talented provided the following comment:

Well, my children don't know I have GED. And I was talking with my co-workers about it. It was a very sensitive topic. We were talking about the fact that my son is going to get a GED. He didn't want to. He struggled and struggled and struggled. And I was like well, you're not keeping up, summer school is not going to help, blah, blah, blah. I said, at your age, because he is an April child, you'll be 20 years old before you graduate. You may want to consider getting your GED and going into the service or whatever. And the first thing that came out of his mouth is, "I'll stay in school until I'm 25, I don't want no GED." You know, and so yeah it does have a negative stigma. And the girls [co-workers] were saying, my son has a GED and my husband got a GED and I say, your co-worker has a GED. And they all said which one, you know, not Multi-talented. And I said I do, and they could not believe it. So, I have not told my children, as a matter of fact, I plan to tell them at Mother's Day dinner because I think the problems my kids have had with education is trying to meet a standard that I didn't meet. They don't know I didn't finish high school. So, I really think I have been unfair to them.

Hellacious mailed his university transcript and ACT scores to me with a cover letter stating how much he enjoyed participating in this research project. Hellacious said, "I am enjoying the attention gotten as part of participating in your study."

I benefited from conducting this research study as well. I have gained a greater awareness and appreciation of the persistence experiences for GED recipients in four-year institutions. Moreover, the persistence experiences that they shared helped me to persist with completing this research study.

I would like to conclude this research study with words of wisdom by the participants of this study for other GED recipients enrolled in four-year institutions. The participants of this study were asked the following question: What advice would you give to a fellow GED recipient enrolled in a four-year institution? The following advice is relevant for traditional high school graduates also:

- Beautiful: Just stay focused as my mom would say all the time, my prayer for you is to stay focused at all times.
- Bold: You are no different from the person sitting next to you. That person may not have been through the circumstances or scenarios that you have been through. We all learn from every experience we have and just make it happen. Don't let nobody tell you that you can't do it, because you can. You just have to apply yourself.
- Caring: Stay with it. Work very hard, and try to mix in a little pleasure. Try to have a balanced life and look forward to a future for yourself. Don't wait until you are 65 years old to start thinking about what you are going to do when you grow up.
- Cautious: If you have any questions, talk to an advisor. Don't let it [college] overwhelm you. It's not as big and crushing as it might seem. It's really kind of relaxed. Don't hesitate to ask your teachers for help outside of class.
- Courteous: Stay away from the parties, try not to party too much, and just be about your work. If you're about the work, then it'll go by smooth. If you about to parties, then it'll go by rough.
- Darling: Do not give up. Everybody has their own reasons for dropping out of high school or obtaining their GED. Don't think that you gave up in high school, just go somewhere better than high school. Get involved, enjoy it, don't work yourself to death.
- Determined: I'd tell them to stay focused. Just because you have a GED, doesn't mean you're slow, it doesn't mean you're not as smart as everybody else. If you study hard enough, you can pass every class and eventually you will get your degree.
- Gifted: Dig deep in themselves, and don't look down on themselves. Don't allow anybody or any person that they encounter to get them down, because discouragements come every day. I feel like if you don't struggle it's not

worth it. Just don't let anybody stop you. Keep your pursuit going. A lot of times people get a GED for different reasons. It's not because they don't have the knowledge base or whatever, it's just some people stop. They had different occurrences in life that made them get a GED. Just keep moving.

- Great: Decide what you want to do with your life and be dedicated completely, give it your all.
- Hellacious: Don't let anybody tell you that you can't do it. Don't rely on anybody for anything other than to help you get what you want. Always let people give you constructive criticism, and any destructive criticism that is not going to do you any good, discard it immediately. Just don't give up.
- Hilarious: It's not as hard as you think. Before I started college, I thought it would be hard. But once you start college you find it's not at all. I mean really it's fun, you can take as many classes as you want so it's not like high school. I find college easier than high school so anybody who want to go to college should do it. You meet interesting people and you can do a lot of things and it's fun. I enjoy it a lot. I'm sure it'll put a smile on your parents' faces. You get a lot of respect. You're going to college, you're doing something with your life instead of not doing anything at all.
- Joyful: I would be honest and tell them that it's going to be hard, and it is a struggle, but it's not too hard to where you shouldn't try. Give it all you've got. There is nothing that you can't achieve. You can do it.
- Just: Whatever you do, don't give up. It's worth it in the long run. The biggest mistake that you could make is to let them [others] know that they beat you down and you quit.
- Kind: Ask around about teachers that work with their students because you really need somebody that works with you. Don't ask "Is this person easy? Can I get an A?" Ask them, "Do they explain the material well? Will I be able to understand it? Do they provide help outside of the class?" Try to find professors that will work with the student.
- Motivated: Put in the study time. It's just about time.
- Multi-talented: Be patient, never loose faith, just do your best, and don't get discouraged.
- Noble: It's nothing hard. It's not the college, it's not the work, it's not the instructor, it's not the students, it's you. Whatever you do, it will tell, your future will tell. It's up to you, if you want to study. If you can't do the work, help is always there. No matter where you go, help is always

there, you just have to have the will to get the help. Having a positive attitude in whatever you do will make good things happen.

Self-

Motivated: If no one else is supporting you in what you do, motivate yourself and set goals you want to achieve for yourself. Know that in the end no matter what other trials and tribulations you've been through, it will be worth it. Most of all, if you know you didn't acquire all of the skills you needed in high school, by all means study, and research and search out those skills if you want to finish college.

Temerity: Keep pushing. There is something there [at college] for you and you are there for a reason. It is not in vain. You know something has called you to a four-year institution and find it.

Wise: Always handle your own business because when you handle your own business everything shakes out the way you want it to. I mean you go to class, go to work, pay your bills and do what is necessary for you to function without having to have everybody in your business and helping you every five seconds and you can't help yourself. Always keep your paper receipts, forms, and anything that's got that nice stamp on it, the Alpha University stamp. If they say that you don't, or they say that you owe us, or something like that, you just pull out your paper and say, "That's not what this says." They can never screw you over if you have your paper [documents].

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APPENDIX A

FLYER

***College Students
with a GED Needed***

to make a difference by

*PARTICIPATING IN A
RESEARCH STUDY*

- must have earned a **GED**
- must be a freshman (2nd semester), sophomore, junior, or senior
 - must be enrolled full-time
- must participate in an interview(s)

****All information will be kept confidential!***

If interested, please contact:

Luria Stubblefield
225-205-7158 (cp); LSHAW8944@aol.com

Luria Stubblefield
225-205-7158 (cp)

Luria Stubblefield
225-205-7158 (cp)

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225-205-7158 (cp)

Luria Stubblefield
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Luria Stubblefield
225-205-7158 (cp)

Luria Stubblefield
225-205-7158 (cp)

Luria Stubblefield
225-205-7158 (cp)

APPENDIX B
PILOT STUDY INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Tell me an adjective that describes (or defines) you and begins with the same letter as your first name
2. Tell me about yourself.
3. Tell me about the role of education in your life.
4. Tell me a little about why you decided to obtain a GED.

Probe: Why did you leave high school?

5. Why did you decide to attend a four-year college after earning your GED?
6. Is there a difference between the college classroom and the GED classroom? Explain.

Probe: What was the hardest thing for you related to being in a college classroom setting? Is it easier to be in a college classroom than a GED class? What makes it better/worse?

7. Did you take any developmental educational courses? How did they help you?
8. Tell me about your interactions with college teachers. With staff members.
9. Do your college teachers and peers know that you have a GED?
10. Does any of your family have GEDs? Baccalaureate or higher degrees?
11. Did your family influence your decision to get a GED? A college degree?
12. Are you involved in any extracurricular activities?
13. Have you thought about quitting college? If so, tell me about those times.
14. What makes you not quit college?
15. Describe a typical college day.
16. How many hours per day do you devote to study? Employment?
17. What are your future goals?

Probe: Do you plan to get a master's degree or higher degree?

18. What advice would you give to fellow GED recipients in four-year institutions?
19. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me?
20. Let us talk about these questions. Was there a time when you did not understand a question?
21. Was there a time when you felt uncomfortable with a question?
22. Would you have phrased any of the questions a different way?
23. Based on your experiences, are there any other questions that I should ask?

Thank you for your time!

APPENDIX C

PRE-INTERVIEW FORM

Name: _____ School: _____

Initial Contact Date: _____ Time: _____ Gender: _____

Classification: _____ Major: _____ Enrollment Status: _____

Age: _____ Race/Ethnicity: _____ Place of Birth: _____

Housing Status: _____ Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Home: _____ Cell: _____ Other: _____

E-mail: _____

Previously enrolled in another institution: Yes _____ No _____

Continuously enrolled since initial date of entry: Yes _____ No _____

Best day/time to call: _____

Best day/time for interview: _____

Where did you see the flyer?: _____

Additional Information: _____

Researcher Notes: _____

Contacts (day, time, nature of contact): _____

APPENDIX D

PILOT STUDY COVER LETTER

Date:

Dear Mr./Ms. _____ :

CONGRATULATIONS! You have been selected to participate in a pilot study on GED recipients in four-year institutions. I am a graduate student working on my doctoral dissertation at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. As a part of the requirements, I have to conduct a research study. The focus of my study is on the persistence of students with GEDs in four-year institutions.

As a GED student enrolled in a four-year institution, you can provide valuable information that could have a positive impact on the educational experiences of all GED students. I would greatly appreciate your assistance with this important research study. Your participation will take only a small amount of your valuable time. Please note that your involvement in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time without consequences.

The data collection process will consist of about a 1 hour interview. The interview will be audiotape recorded and transcribed. The audiotapes and the transcribed interview notes will be kept confidential. Once you complete the interview, you will be given a \$10 gift certificate to Wal-Mart to show my appreciation for sharing your experiences and time with me. This project is not only important to me, but also important to all GED recipients who would like to earn baccalaureate degrees.

Before the interview, you will be requested to sign an informed consent form acknowledging your consent to participate in the pilot study. A copy of the form is attached for your signature. Thank you very much for contacting me and expressing an interest to participate in this important research study. If you have any questions about this research project, please contact me at 225-205-7158 (cp).

Sincerely,
Luria Stubblefield
Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX E

PILOT STUDY INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dissertation Research The Persistence of Students with GEDs in Four-Year Institutions

Your signature on this form gives your consent to participate in this research project, which is designed to study the persistence of students with GEDs in four-year institutions. This research will serve several purposes: (a) to add to the existing research about the persistence experiences of GED recipients in four-year institutions; (b) to provide information that may be useful in the improvement of higher education policies for GED recipients; and (c) to meet partial requirements for a doctoral degree in higher education leadership and research.

This research will consist of an approximately 1 hour interview. The personal interviews will be recorded utilizing fictitious names to reduce the risk of identifying you as a participant of this study.

No personal identifying information about you as a participant will be published in any analysis of data resulting from this study. In addition, no personal information about you will be shared with other persons without the written consent from you.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw your consent and terminate participation by notifying the researcher at any time without consequence.

If you have any questions about this research or concerning your rights, call Luria Stubblefield at 225-205-7158.

"I have been fully informed on the above-described procedure with its possible benefits and risks and I give my permission for participation in this study. "

Print Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX F

PHASE I DATA COLLECTION COVER LETTER

Date:

Dear Mr./Ms. _____ :

CONGRATULATIONS! You have been selected as one of four students to participate in a study on GED recipients in four-year institutions. I am a graduate student working on my doctoral dissertation at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. As a part of the requirements, I have to conduct a research study. The focus of my study is on the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions.

As a GED student enrolled in a four-year institution, you can provide valuable information that will potentially have a positive impact on the educational experiences of all GED students. I would greatly appreciate your assistance with this important research study. Your participation will take only a small amount of your valuable time. Please note that your involvement in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time without consequences.

The data collection process will consist of a 1-2 hour focus group interview involving four students. Thereafter, you will be requested to participate in a semi-structured, in-depth interview, take photographs of your persistence experiences, participate in a 1 hour photo elicitation interview, and submit a copy of your college transcript and ACT or SAT scores. All interviews will be audiotape recorded and transcribed. The audio tapes and the transcribed interview notes will be kept confidential. Once you complete all of the interviews, you will be given a \$10 gift certificate to Wal-Mart to show my appreciation for sharing your experiences and time with me. This project is not only important to me, but also important to all GED recipients who would like to earn baccalaureate degrees.

Before the interview, you will be requested to sign an informed consent form acknowledging your consent to participate in this research study. A copy of the form is attached for your signature.

Thank you very much for contacting me and expressing an interest to participate in this important research study. If you have any questions about this research project or have a problem with the interview time, please contact me at 225-205-7158.

Sincerely,
Luria Stubblefield

APPENDIX G

PHASE I DATA COLLECTION INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dissertation Research The Persistence of Students with a GED in Four-Year Institutions

Your signature on this form gives your consent to participate in this research project. This research will serve several purposes: (a) to add to the existing research about the persistence of GED recipients in four-year institutions; (b) to provide information that may be useful in the improvement of higher education policies for GED recipients; and (c) to meet partial requirements for a doctoral degree in higher education leadership and research.

This research will consist of an approximately 1-2 hour focus group interview. Thereafter, you will be requested to participate in a semi-structured, in-depth interview, take photographs that describe your persistence experiences, participate in a 1-hour photo elicitation interview, and submit a copy of your college transcript and ACT or SAT scores. The focus group interviews will consist of four GED recipients and will be recorded utilizing fictitious names to reduce the risk of identifying you as a participant in this study.

No personal identifying information about you as a participant will be published in any analysis of data resulting from this study. In addition, no personal information about you will be shared with other persons without the written consent from you.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw your consent and terminate participation by notifying the researcher at any time without consequence.

If you have any questions about this research or concerning your rights, call Luria Stubblefield at 225-205-7158.

"I have been fully informed on the above-described procedure with its possible benefits and risks and I give my permission for participation in this study. "

Print Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX H

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

The participants were engaged in a focus group interview using role-play. I requested the students to assume the role of other GED recipients on a mission to find out the persistence experiences of students with a GED in four-year institutions.

1. Tell me an adjective that describes (or defines) you and begins with the same letter as your first name. (Ice breaker).
2. Have you ever thought about quitting college? Tell me about those times.
3. What makes you not quit college?

Role-play discussion:

The students were asked to place themselves in the shoes of other GED recipients in four-year institutions and respond to the following questions:

1. What are some of the experiences that you *think* have positively and negatively impacted the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions.
2. What are some of the experiences that you *know* have positively and negatively impacted the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions.

Thanks for your time!

APPENDIX I
PHASE II DATA COLLECTION COVER LETTER

Date:

Dear Mr./Ms. _____ :

CONGRATULATIONS! You have been selected to participate in a study on GED recipients in four-year institutions. I am a graduate student working on my doctoral dissertation at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. As a part of the requirements, I have to conduct a research study. The focus of my study is on the persistence of students with a GED in a four-year institution.

As a GED student enrolled in a four-year institution, you can provide valuable information that will potentially have a positive impact on the educational experiences of all GED students. I would greatly appreciate your assistance with this important research study. Your participation will take only a small amount of your valuable time. Please note that your involvement in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time without consequences.

The data collection process will consist of about a 1 hour interview. You will be requested to take photographs that describe your persistence experiences, participate in about a 1 hour photo elicitation interview, and submit a copy of your college transcript and ACT or SAT scores. The interview will be audiotape recorded and transcribed. The audio tapes and the transcribed interview notes will be kept in my possession and will be kept confidential. The data collection process can be conducted at the campus library or at a place specified by you. Once you complete the interviews, you will be given a \$10 gift certificate to Wal-Mart to show my appreciation for sharing your experiences and time with me. This project is not only important to me, but also important to all GED recipients who would like to earn baccalaureate degrees.

Before the interview, you will be requested to sign an informed consent form acknowledging your consent to participate in this research study. A copy of the form is attached for your signature.

Thank you very much for contacting me and expressing an interest to participate in this important research study. If you have any questions about this research project or have a problem with the interview time, please contact me at 225-205-7158.

Sincerely,
Luria Stubblefield
Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX J

PHASE II DATA COLLECTION INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dissertation Research

The Persistence of Students with a GED in Four-Year Institutions

Your signature on this form gives your consent to participate in this research project and to utilize the pictures that you take to describe your persistence experiences solely for this research study, which is designed to study the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions. This research will serve several purposes: (a) to add to the existing research about the persistence of students with a GED in four-year institutions; (b) to provide information that may be useful in the improvement of higher education policies for GED recipients; and (c) to meet partial requirements for a doctoral degree in higher education leadership and research.

This research will consist of an about 1 hour interview. You will be requested to take photographs that describe your persistence experiences, participate in about a 1 hour photo elicitation interview, and submit a copy of your college transcript and ACT or SAT scores. The interviews will be recorded utilizing fictitious names to reduce the risk of identifying you as a participant of this study.

No personal identifying information about you will be published in any analysis of data resulting from this study. In addition, no personal information about you will be shared with other persons without written consent from you.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw your consent and terminate participation by notifying the researcher at any time without consequence.

If you have any questions about this research or concerning your rights, call Luria Stubblefield at 225-205-7158.

"I have been fully informed on the above-described procedure with its possible benefits and risks and I give my permission for participation in this study. "

Print Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX K

PHASE II DATA COLLECTION INTERVIEW GUIDE

The guide below shows the questions that correspond to the literature review topics.

Background Information (BI)

Academic Integration (AI)

Social Integration (SI)

Time on Task (TT)

Developmental Education (DE)

1. Tell me an adjective that describes (or defines) you and begins with the same letter as your first name. (Ice-breaker)
2. Tell me about yourself. (Ice-breaker)
3. Tell me about the role of education in your life. (BI)
4. Why did you leave high school? What was the last grade of high school completed? (BI)
5. How much time passed in between leaving high school and enrolling in the GED program? Tell me a little about why you decided to obtain a GED. (BI)
6. Did you immediately attend a four-year institution after getting the GED? Why did you decide to attend a four-year university after earning your GED? (BI, AI, SI)
7. Is there a difference between the college classroom and the GED classroom? Explain.
Probe: What was the hardest thing for you related to being in a college classroom setting? Is it easier to be in a college classroom than a GED class? What makes it harder/easier? What makes it better/worse? (AI)
8. Did you take any developmental educational courses? Did they help you? How did they help you? (DE)
9. Do you think that there were any gaps in your preparation for college? (AI, DE)
Probe: Could more have been done when acquiring your GED so that you would not have gaps or deficiencies? What could the institution do to make your experience more meaningful?
10. Tell me about your interactions with college teachers. With staff members. (AI, SI)

11. Do your college teachers and peers know that you have a GED? (AI, SI)
12. Does any of your family have GEDs? Baccalaureate or higher degrees? (AI, SI, BI)
13. Did your family influence your decision to get a GED? A college degree? (AI, SI, BI)
14. Are you involved in any extracurricular activities at the campus? (SI)
15. Have you thought about quitting college? If so, tell me about those times. What thoughts/feelings do you have when you feel like quitting? (AI, SI, TT, DE)
16. What makes you not quit college? (AI, SI, TT, DE)
17. Describe your typical college day. What do you do from the time that you get up in the morning to the time that you go to bed? (AI, SI, TT)
18. How many hours per day do you devote to study? Employment? (TT)
Probe: How do you study?
19. What are your future goals? (AI, SI)
Probe: Do you plan to get a master's degree or higher degree?
20. Participants' words of wisdom: What advice would you give to fellow GED recipients in four-year institutions? (AI, SI, TT, DE)
21. Define persistence? (AI, SI, TT, DE)
22. What is success for you? (AI, SI)
23. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me?

Thank you for your time!

APPENDIX L
PHOTOGRAPH FORM

Name: _____ Picture #: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____

Brief description of photograph: _____

What does this picture mean to you? _____

Thoughts or feelings related to the picture: _____

Additional Information: _____

VITA

Luria Shaw Stubblefield is the daughter of the late Robert and Emma Shaw of Berwick, Louisiana, and the youngest of six siblings. She is a first-generation college graduate and the first person of her parents' families to earn a doctorate degree. She is a graduate of Holy Cross Elementary and Central Catholic High School of Morgan City, Louisiana.

Luria graduated from Southern University and A&M College in 1993 with a Bachelor of Science degree in biology. She later enrolled at Louisiana State University, graduating in 1995 with a Master of Education degree in secondary science, and earning an Educational Specialist Certificate in 1997. She began her doctoral studies at Louisiana State University in the Department of Educational Leadership and Research with a concentration in higher education during Spring 1996. She was a Huel D. Perkins Fellow and Southern Regional Education Board Fellow.

Luria was employed with Southeastern Louisiana University Educational Opportunity Center as an Outreach Generalist from 1997-1998. Thereafter, she accepted a position as the Evaluations Coordinator with the Louis Stokes Louisiana Alliance for Minority Participation (LS-LAMP), a statewide, comprehensive program aimed at increasing the number and quality of minority students earning bachelor's degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. A year later, Luria was promoted to the LS-LAMP Statewide Program Administrator. She currently holds this position.

Luria resides in Zachary, Louisiana with her husband, Michael and two children, Alaina and Michael II.